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THE WORLD WE LIVE IN.

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A Novel.

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BY

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CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
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THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

CHAPTER I.

IT is fourteen miles as the crow flies from Bendore Castle, in the wildest part of the Western Highlands, to Glen Cruachan, the seat of Sir John Smith, Knight, retired iron-master and millionaire.

One can drive, but the road, avoiding the hills and following an easier line of country near the sea-shore, is thirty miles about. One can ride, but there is risk to the neck.

Colonel Tremayne, R.E., settled the matter by walking. A fourteen-mile walk across these Scotch hills, rugged, stony, and steep as they were, was nothing to him, for he was young, strong, and sound in wind and limb. Moreover, he had but lately done some hill work elsewhere on a much grander

scale. He had passed five whole years in t interior of Asia, and was but now returne No one of his friends exactly knew why h had betaken himself to Beloochistan, sti less why he had made so long a stay in that dreary and inhospitable region. His first letters home had done little more than state the fact that, being on leave of absence, he had crossed the Indian frontier from th North-Western Provinces, where his compan had been stationed. In course of time the learned that he had left the army.

Colonel Tremayne had always been a genial and a popular man among friends and messmates, but never a communicativ one, either in talk or in correspondence. Gradually his letters grew fewer and shorter and in time they ceased altogether. Those few of his friends who still interested themselves in him were doubtful even of his being in existence: five years' absence is a terrible strain upon the bond of any friendship. Beloochistan is not a country of which anyone knows much beyond the fact that a sojourner there carries his life in his hand. At mess tables and at clubs it was surmised that a fever, an affray, or an accident had ended poor Jim Tremayne's life, or in fi

years he would surely have turned up again. So had Colonel Tremayne gone under the wave for all who had known him and liked him, and was no more to them than a pleasant memory. His brother officers, when they had eaten and drunken at the monotonous mess dinner, and had reached that kindly meditative mood which coffee, cognac and cigars promote, would moralise one by one in their turns over his ways and his lost prospects in life, as of one no longer in the race.

"Poor Jim! As straight a fellow as ever stepped."

"What an ass to go to that hole when he had such chances before him in the Service."

"An ass! Well, he wasn't much of a fellow to talk, but I never knew a man with a better head. You bet he didn't go to Beloochistan for nothing. He saw his way to a pile, my dear friend."

"He was simple in some things," said another meditatively; "he'd never believe everyone wasn't as straight as himself."

"And what a cheery fellow he was. I don't believe you could have got Jim to say the outlook was bad, whatever happened."

"Yes, by Jove, he was that; I shall never forget that bad time in India, when half the battalion was down with jungle fever. Where should we have been without poor old Jim?"

So was Colonel Tremayne's epitaph indited for him by various hands; not indeed in that classical style which is appropriate to epitaphs, but as truly perhaps as those of some of us will be written when our time for such post-obituary statement shall arrive; and there was a mournful consciousness on the part of the inditers that it behoved them to speak out these truths of their departed friend freely and clearly, inasmuch as it was but too plain to them that no mortal hand would ever engrave any epitaph, true or false, of him upon a civilised tombstone.

It so happened that on the very evening when these not unaffecting utterances were being made, Colonel Tremayne, his sojourn in Asia ended—being in the very best possible health and spirits, after a quick and prosperous passage in a P. and O. boat through the Canal and by Italy and France—was actually landing at Southampton.

The first intimation which the world in general had of his return took the form of

short paragraphs in the daily papers to the effect that Colonel Tremayne, of the Engineers, had returned to England after a lengthened residence and extensive travels in Beloochistan, and had had interviews "with certain high officials and other eminent personages."

The London season was past, or assuredly Colonel Tremayne would have straightway been made into a social lion, after the fashion of our countrymen. On the other hand it was that period of the year when the sea-serpent lifts his shaggy mane from the deep, when frogs fall to the earth in rain, and when the gooseberry swells perceptibly under the eye of the reporter. The newspapers could not afford to let the Oriental traveller alone. Rumours began to spread as to the adventures Colonel Tremayne had passed through, and their surprising results. He was credited with having done and seen wonderful things, and was said to have accumulated and brought home an enormous fortune. The London correspondent of a New York journal "interviewed" him, and, although it was impossible for one human being to tell another less than Colonel Tremayne in his most genial manner told his tormentor, the

result of the interview occupied five columns of the American newspaper, was flashed back to England, and Colonel Tremayne became for the time, and quite against his will, a "celebrity."

It was mid-August, and all the world of London was taking its holiday by the sea, abroad, or on the moors. Colonel Tremayne had accepted an invitation from his friend Lord Bendore. It had been his first visit anywhere since his return; it was over, and now he was on his way from Bendore Castle to keep a second engagement with Sir John Smith at Glen Cruachan.

Colonel Tremayne paused as he stood on the last rocky ridge before reaching his destination. It was a moorland country all round him, rugged with jutting peaks of gray limestone, with slabs and ledges of the same gray rock, as far as the eye could reach, interspersed with the russet heather of the moorland. Here and there the russet deepened to red, where the heather blossoms had opened more freely. In the whole landscape there was no green at all of grass or leafage, except in the deep glen at his feet, where a tiny burn had its course among the

stones and boulders. Along its banks the broom, not now in flower, showed green, and, where the rivulet flowed more slowly and its banks were damp, there was a short turf that showed green too.

Though it was early in the day, not ten o'clock yet, the August sun was high overhead, and it shone straight into the little pools of the burn below, and illuminated their amber-tinted depths. The honey-sweet scent of heather came to him mingled with the pleasant acrid smell of turf smoke from some unseen shepherd's shieling, and he heard the far-off tinkle of a sheep bell. Nothing more in all this than a common, homely moorland landscape, but it impressed Colonel Tremayne. Hill scenery indeed it was, but what a contrast to the vast houseless solitude, the awful desolation of those strange far-off mountain ranges that he had spent five long years of his life among. His thoughts travelled for a moment to the scene of his long wanderings; he was at home at last, among his own people, at rest and welcomed. He was coming from friends and going to friends—his heart was glad within him. He rose and continued his walk. The world was a pleasant world, he thought, with hopefulness in it.

He turned a shoulder of the hillside, and suddenly Glen Cruachan House was before him, across the narrow valley at his feet, and half-way up the opposite acclivity. A modern edifice, built in the style of a French château as is the fashion of some country houses of Scotland, with many round towers, having slated conical roofs. It was a very large and stately place, worthy of a great millionaire, and Colonel Tremayne coming upon it so suddenly from the wilderness of moor and hill was taken aback a little at its unexpected grandeur; but, as he gazed curiously down from the height upon which he stood on its broad expanse of roof; on its several inner courts and quadrangles, which he could see spread out in bird's-eye view beneath him, and on the stone terraces and trim flower-beds round about it, his thoughts and his curiosity were not by any means centred on Sir John Smith's magnificence or the ingenuity of his architect.

"I wonder," thought Colonel Tremayne, "if she is there already?"

CHAPTER II.

THOSE who live year after year in the midst of English social life seem hardly to be conscious of its occasional changes. For them society is a web that is for ever being woven with the same warp and with the same woof, a continuously identical material, having an unvarying pattern and unvarying colours.

It is only the man who, like Colonel Tremayne, has lived out of this small world for a time and returns to it, who sees the variations which, to livers in it, have been too gradual to be noticeable. The web that society is at work in weaving, he sees is not precisely the same web that he left on the loom some years before. There is a change. He looks closely and detects two or three new threads in the material.

Colonel Tremayne saw immediately that the world in which, after long abstinence from

any sort of social relaxation, he was going to take his well-earned holiday, was not quite the world he had left five years before. It was, to begin with, a larger world and a more tolerant one. It had recruited members from the outside; and with them, ideas from the outside which once it would have scouted. As there was more variety, so, thought Colonel Tremayne, there was promise of more amusement. Æstheticism, which he had left the fad and fashion of a few eccentric people, scouted by the wise, he found a creed almost modified into common-sense and accepted by the many. As it had somewhat abated the old ugliness of English external life, Colonel Tremayne, who was a tolerant man, was rather pleased with its acceptance in the world than not. He found, however, that the advanced brigade of eccentric ladies and gentlemen still marching under the flag of extreme æstheticism had found a new weapon to their hand, and were making social capital, and a parody, and a plaything out of some of the more occult and mystical phases of the philosophers. In this there was again no cause for despondency to a man to whom the comedy of daily life had always afforded keen enjoyment.

Among the many ideas newly imported into the league of rich and idle people which calls itself society, was one which was immediately apparent to the new comer, and from which he promised himself a still greater fund of entertainment. This new thread in the web of English life he found in the notion of sundry energetic and lively individuals—a notion already carried to some extent into practice—that our insular ways require reform in the direction of demonstrativeness. The underlying idea of the reformers would seem to be that the best talk of English society is but poor and pointless talk; that the gestures, walk, attitude, and manners of English men and women are for the most part wholly unexpressive of their emotions; that their entrances into and exits from their drawing-rooms, dining-rooms, and carriages, are as a rule ill-timed and purposeless, and our insular ways generally the most surprisingly reserved, angular, and undramatic of those of any civilised nation. The world is avowedly a drama, "and all the men and women in it players;" the reformer's cry, therefore, is: "Dramatise our daily life; make it in seeming what it is in fact."

To this end the innovators, still but a

small if an active minority, proposed, as he perceived, to reform us by importing something of stage-craft into the daily routine of social converse; and they began their task by endeavouring to make their own dialogue brisker and more pointed, their attitudes and gestures more suggestive of a meaning, their entrances and exits more opportune and telling.

No one fell in so readily with the various humours of the day as the shrewd north-countryman who owned Glen Cruachan. Sir John Smith had made an enormous fortune in iron, and he was proud of the fact; he was proud too, as a self-made man, of his knighthood, but he was prouder still of having accomplished what in the opinion of some good judges of life is a still more difficult task—he had made considerable way in the world of society, and could bid the rich, the fashionable, and the famous of the world to his house, and they were exceedingly glad to come.

He knew very well that no amount of mere fortune could have achieved this success without something to help it. Sir John had no illusions on the subject of his social success. He knew well from the first that his own

personal qualifications would do nothing to recommend him ; no one could possibly care for the company of a middle-aged Yorkshire ironmaster, who veiled his provincial accent and his occasional lapses from right English with a touch of pomposity.

He saw that English society, not composed of men and women a bit more heartless than their fellows, is, as a matter of simple necessity, absolutely heartless in the aggregate ; that to enter it and make way in it is as much a matter of pure business, combined with tact and knowledge of men, as the making and selling of iron ; that there is too much of a crowd and a struggle for the emotions to have standing-room even ; that to move and make way in this crowd is as much a matter of calculation, of give and take, as political economy or a game of chess.

Here was Sir John's opportunity ; he could give and he would take—not with any open and unpleasing cynicism, but giving freely and insisting upon getting fullest measure in repayment. He employed all the shrewdness that had formerly stood him in good stead in his business, and he offered the world what the world wanted.

His dinners and his wines were unexcep-

tionable. He had a fine town house, a beautiful place in Yorkshire, another in a western county, and Glen Cruachan in Scotland. His coverts were fuller of game than anyone else's, his stables of hunters. He was liberal in mounts to his riding friends. He was hospitable by nature, and he had in him the rare faculty of hospitality, of getting the right people together and contenting them somehow; but then he insisted that they should be the right people.

He had the advantage—the social advantage, for there is none other—of being unmarried, and of having no near relations, so that he had no one to please but himself in selecting his guests.

In his capacity of host he never forgot that he was playing at a scientific game, and that to play it well his guests must represent their full value on the board. They must be very rich, or eminent, or very fashionable; if women, either fair to see or else very amusing or rather notorious. His Philistine shrewdness would not put up with nobodies; he sold his hospitality, his guests must pay in person.

They knew it well too, and he and they were contented; and it is difficult to see that

the higher moral criticism can object or can find occasion herein for a sermon. It is the way of the world, and surely not a bad way; if the over-righteous are offended by it, it is for them to suggest some other basis on which social intercourse can take place on the larger scale.

Glen Cruachan, before Sir John had built his house in it, was celebrated only for the great stretch of excellent grouse moor which surrounded it; now it was talked of all over Scotland, and not for its magnificence alone.

Upon his house Sir John had spent time, thought, money, and ingenuity. He had determined to strike out an original idea in house-building, one that should arouse curiosity among his neighbours, and he had fully succeeded.

The primary object of country house life, he considered, is to keep the assembled guests together. To this end, going back to the customs of our forefathers, Sir John had built a vast central hall, a huge and lofty room, comfortably carpeted, and panelled, from floor to arched wooden ceiling, with polished oak. Half-way up from the floor, a heavy gallery runs round three sides of the room

and communicates by doorways with the various corridors which lead to the rest of the house, and the gallery itself is reached from the room by a short flight of stairs.

In the decoration of this great apartment ideas of comfort have reigned supreme. It is the morning-room and the breakfast-room of the house, and the library as well, for red-curtained recesses along the gallery afford pleasant nooks and corners for readers. Great tables on the floor below are spread with magazines, novels, newspapers, and all the litter of a country house and shooting-quarters combined—the work-boxes, sketch-books, and writing materials of the ladies, the fishing-rods, dog-whistles, luncheon-boxes, and cartridge-making machines of the men, and all the indescribably miscellaneous small lumber common to both sexes.

The stairs to the gallery being broad and easy, and access quickly obtained by them to the living part of the house, the chief coming and going of the guests is necessarily by them and along the galleries. As it is sometimes ingeniously contrived by the dramatist that the whole "business" of his play shall take in one spot, with the minimum of help from the stage carpenter and the

stage decorator, so it was intended by Sir John that all the pleasant "business" and intercourse of his guests at Glen Cruachan should take place in this its chief apartment.

CHAPTER III.

"LADIES and gentlemen," said Sir John Smith, standing at the top of the stairs and addressing his guests assembled at breakfast in the great hall below him, "ladies and gentlemen, I have some very good news for you to-day."

"Hear, hear!" came from a stoutish, bearded young man, the cynic and man-of-the-world of the party.

"I have just received two telegrams," said Sir John, and he showed the yellow papers in his hand.

. "Read!" cried the bearded gentleman, parodying a frequent cry in the House of Commons.

Sir John slowly adjusted his eye-glasses on his nose.

"Go ahead, sir!" called out the same guest, quite in the latest style of parliamentary interruption.

"My dear Lord George," remonstrated Sir John plaintively, "how can I possibly 'go ahead' if you interrupt me at every moment?"

It was the rather blunt humour of Lord George Vivash to pretend that as Sir John had just made his entry into Parliament, he could desire nothing better than to keep his parliamentary hand in practice.

"I did it on purpose," said his lordship; "capital practice for you, Sir John. I was representing the obstructionist member—you'll have to encounter him some day, you know."

Sir John fell in with the pleasantry of his guest.

"I thank my honourable friend," he said, bowing over his glasses. "Ahem!" he went on, affecting the hesitating huskiness of the commonplace prosy Member of Parliament, "Ahem! I was saying when the noble lord interrupted me that I had good news to give you. Our Highland—er——"

"Home," suggested Lord George.

"Thank you, my lord, *retreat*—our Highland retreat is about to be honoured by the presence of a very distinguished party. The fascinating and fashionable Countess Anna von Schimmerling——"

"Diana!" said Lord George in an undertone, addressing a handsome fair woman opposite to him at the table, "do you remember?"

His sister smiled and nodded.

"You remarked, my lord?" asked Sir John blandly.

"No, I said nothing."

Sir John continued in the same strain: "The Countess will be accompanied by her father, General Stone, and by her late husband's brother, Herr von Bauer."

Lord George could not repress an exclamation in a more audible tone. It took the form of "By Jove!"

His host overheard him and smiled. "I think," he said, looking towards him inquiringly and with much politeness, "that the noble lord hazarded a remark?"

"I only said, 'By Jove!'"

"May I venture to inquire of my noble friend," said Sir John, always in the parliamentary character he had assumed, "if his expression applies to the Countess von Schimmerling, to her father, General Stone, or to her relative by marriage, Herr von Bauer?"

Lord George half rose in his place and

made his answer in the vague style of a Minister at question time. "The honourable member must allow me to explain that in using the expression 'By Jove,' I was referring to matters not now before the House, and that I meant to convey nothing but that I had the pleasure of meeting Herr von Bauer five years ago at Baden, and," observed his lordship in an undertone which did not reach his host's ears, as he resumed his seat, "dropped five hundred pounds to him at baccarat."

Sir John bowed and smiled. "My noble friend's explanation is satisfactory. The distinguished party I refer to will arrive by the mid-day train."

The announcement of this pleasant addition to the party was received with cries of "Hear! hear!" from all parts of the breakfast table, and Sir John proceeded to adjust his eye-glasses upon the second telegram which he held in his hand. He read aloud as follows:

"I shall walk over from Bendore tomorrow morning and be with you at breakfast time.

"TREMAYNE."

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is no less a person than Colonel James Tremayne, the eminent Oriental traveller, and, I believe I may add, millionaire."

Lady Diana interrupted the parliamentary farce that the party had hitherto lent itself to by clapping her hands with great glee.

"Oh, I am so glad! Dear old Jim!"

There was among the party an extraordinarily handsome gentleman of about thirty, with fair hair and beard, an intelligent cast of features, large blue eyes, dreamily meditative, and on his lips a smile seeming to be partly compounded of complacent charity with human nature, partly of an intelligent confidence in his own ways of thought. He too nodded his head approvingly at the mention of Colonel Tremayne's name, but did not speak, though his smile was not interrupted.

"Edward!" cried Lady Diana, who seemed to own some property in this pleasant personage, "Edward! Do you hear? Jim! dear old Jim!"

The gentleman addressed nodded again smilingly, but gave no further sign of life.

Sir John dropped his eye-glasses with the odd relaxation of facial muscles which that act occasions, and came down the stairs.

"What, Lady Diana, do *you* know Colonel Tremayne?"

"I should think so," said that lady; "why, he is George's and my first cousin."

"And the best fellow that ever lived," added Lord George.

There was an American young lady among Sir John's guests, Miss Langham, a very pretty girl, and, like so many of the young and charming American ladies who come over the Atlantic to be made much of in the old country, very rich, very independent, very sharp, and very advanced in opinions, though not a bit more forward in any way than made her very good company in a country house.

"Oh do tell now!" cried this young lady. "Only think! Colonel Tremayne your cousin, Lord George. Why, there were five columns of telegrams only a month ago in *The New York Herald*. I am just dying to see him."

When the young lady spoke quickly and was off her guard, she sometimes forgot to use the old-fashioned way of talking which is still habitual in this backward old country, and which she could speak admirably when she chose.

Lord George laughed. "So am I, Miss

Langham; I have not, you know, for more than five years."

"Oh, but do tell us all you know about him."

"Why, I know no more than all the world knows. Jim went into the heart of Asia about five years since, we never could exactly make out why, and came out about two months ago."

"And is that all?" asked Miss Langham, looking disappointed.

"Why," said his lordship, "is that not a good deal? Think of the number of people who have gone into that part of the world and *never* come out again. It strikes me that Jim ought to rest upon his laurels now for the rest of his life—and on his rupees."

"Oh!" cried Miss Langham, "then that is true about the rupees? Colonel Tremayne *is* a millionaire?"

"I don't know anything about that," said Lord George, "though people have it that he has brought home whole lakhs, or crores, or pagodas, or whatever the Indian equivalent is for making one's pile out there. The main point for his friends is that he is alive and well. Poor old Jim!"—Lord George consulted his watch—"he ought to be here now.

If I knew which way he was coming I'd go and meet him."

"It's so like Jim," said his plump and pretty cousin, "to walk; he always was so odd in everything."

Lord George looked critically at his sister. "Lady Diana does certainly not look much like what you call in the States a 'walkist,' does she, Miss Langham?"

"I beg your pardon, Lord George," said that young lady sharply, "we say nothing of the kind in the United States."

"Indeed," said his lordship, "I am very sorry. I thought you did. Pray how would you express the idea?"

"'Walkist,' indeed!" cried the young lady with a pretty toss of the head. "I wish you would understand that the only good English now spoken in the world is spoken among our people."

"Indeed!" said Lord George blandly, "that surprises me exceedingly. It would be so good of you to tell us all about it."

It was a tempting invitation, and Lord George looked for once really interested and really anxious for information. The cynical look which she never quite liked had vanished from his face. She would venture.

"We speak good English, Lord George" —and the party listened to the young lady in silence—"because we have preserved the traditions of the classic times of the language. We speak, sir, the English of Shakespeare, the English of Milton, and the English of Tillotson and of Hooker."

"The 'judicious Hooker,'" observed Lord George parenthetically; "I have heard of him."

Miss Langham's utterance was so distinct and fluent that it was quite a pleasure to listen to so pretty a young lady talking so freely and so unexpectedly well.

"Now you know," said Lord George, "I had no idea of all this! I must really travel in the States next autumn, like every one else."

Miss Langham thought well to check any tendency to "frivolity" in Lord George by talking on.

"Our country is a big country, Lord George, and our people are a go-ahead people. There is no chance of the language getting provincialised in narrow cliques with us, or vegetating in backwood villages, as it does in this benighted old England of yours."

"Quite true," said Lord George with grave

assent, and he added insidiously: "Pray tell me, Miss Langham, how you would put it in America, in a more classic way, you know, than I said it, that my sister was not what I called a 'walkist.'"

"We should say," answered Miss Langham, taken in for once by Lord George's grave air of inquiry, "we should say that Lady Diana Follett was *not much on the walk*."

This improving conversation was interrupted by the opening of the great door of the hall, and the appearance thereat of the butler. He was in conversation with some one outside, who appeared to be divesting himself of his hat and stick, and did not seem at all inclined to hurry himself.

"All right!" said the voice outside, in a very deliberate tone, "I'll go in."

"Hullo!" cried Lord George, starting up, "that's Jim's voice!"

The deliberate voice was again heard, and seemed to be replying to an offer of refreshment on the part of Sir John's head servant.

"No, thanks," the voice said, "I'd rather have beer."

The host came forward, and raised his voice in hospitable entreaty: "Come in, my dear

friend, come in. After your long walk you must be——"

"Jim, Jim, do come in!" cried Lady Diana impatiently.

The new arrival was not to be hurried. He was heard to give a further direction for his refreshment. He added: "With a lump of ice in it, please."

At last the impatience of Sir John and his guests was relieved. The butler announced, "Colonel Tremayne," and a tall and singularly handsome man walked into the room—a spare, broad-shouldered man of over thirty, with deep-set gray eyes and brown hair, a face with calm resolute expression, sharply-cut thin features, a great sweeping moustache hiding the shape of his mouth, and on his face, neck, and hands still the dark reddish bronze which an Indian sun had given them.

"Oh!" cried Miss Langham, beneath her breath, and that single exclamation expressed a volume of appreciation of the new arrival.

"Humph!" exclaimed, in approving tones, Professor Dredge, the celebrated Oxford historiological psychologist, contemplating the Colonel's individuality from a different point of view, and not without approval.

"Looks pretty fit!" said Captain Shendy,

who, being hardly anything beyond the most distinguished steeple-chase rider in Great Britain, had no eye for anything beyond physical condition.

The extremely good-looking man with a fair beard, expressive eyes, and an intelligent smile, did not break the silence which was habitual to him, or the smile which seldom left his interesting face; but he stood a little in the background as the new arrival entered, and seemed, from the livelier expression on his countenance, to be waiting to take a particular and personal interest in the newcomer.

Colonel Tremayne shook hands with his host, and Sir John hospitably took entire possession of him for the moment.

"You must be tired, Colonel Tremayne. Fourteen miles before breakfast across one of the stiffest moors in Scotland! Why, you must be half dead."

"No," said his guest in his unemotional manner; "only thirsty."

"Mullens!" cried Sir John, "open a bottle of that very dry '74 champagne at once."

"Thanks, Sir John, but I'd rather have beer. Your butler has promised to—— Ah, George!" he said, seeing his cousins. "My

dear Di!"—he gave a hand to each—"glad to see you again. I had some hopes of meeting you here."

"Jim!" said Lady Diana in a remonstrant tone, as she held his hand in hers for a minute.

"Well, Di, what is it?" he asked, laughing.

"Do you remember that it is five years since we met?" She looked very seriously in his face.

"Well?" he asked; too impassively to content her.

"We all thought you dead, Jim!"

Lady Diana was emotional for a woman of the world, and the tears stood for a moment in her eyes.

"You should have had more faith in your cousin's vitality, Di!"

"By-the-bye," said Lady Diana suddenly, and in the tone of a person who has lost a bunch of keys or a pocket-handkerchief, "where is my husband?—I forgot! it was since you—everything, I think, is since you left us in that extraordinary way! Where is he? Edward, do come here! This is Jim; Jim, this is my husband, Edward, you know."

It was the good-looking young man with the smile, the beard, and the fine eyes, that

she presented. The two men had nothing particular to say to each other; but shaking hands, they amiably exchanged that confused murmur of assent to the act of introduction that no one among Englishmen but the over-confident and the social swaggerer dares to make too articulate.

"Or will you have claret?" went on Sir John, with his hospitable eagerness. "I've still got some Lafitte of '58; just the thing for you after your long walk."

"You are very kind; but I would really rather have beer."

"Or," said Sir John, whose cellar had a reputation, "a glass of a very peculiar dry sherry I have—Tio Pepe—you know it?"

"Yes, I know it; that is, I used to know it, years ago; but I'd rather have——"

At this moment, Mullens appeared with a foaming silver tankard of ale.

"Ah," said Colonel Tremayne, at last with some little approach to animation, taking it from the butler's hands. He looked lovingly into it, and gave it a skilful circular shake. "I will just give the ice time to melt. Yes," he said, addressing Sir John's guests, who had gathered round him expectant, "there are some things, Sir John—some things, Di—

which the poor exile from England"—he spoke now for the first time with a touch of feeling in his rich deep voice, a tone which went straight to his cousin Diana's heart, and struck Miss Langham also as singularly interesting—"things which the poor exile, away from his friends, his relations, his books, his club, and his newspaper, far from home and its comforts, away from railways, from post offices, and—and all that; things he longs for with a yearning which—which no words can express," he took a long deep draught at the tankard, "and one of these things, Sir John, is beer!"

Sir John said encouragingly:

"Take another pull, Colonel Tremayne."

"What for, Sir John?" asked the new arrival, and he held out the tankard to his host's inspection.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sir John Smith in astonishment; "he has finished it!"

Lady Diana looked kindly at her cousin, but Miss Langham's sense of the romantic seemed to have received a shock.

"Really, Lady Diana," she said in an undertone, "your cousin——"

Lady Diana seemed to divine her disappointment and its cause.

"No," she said, laughing, "he is not æsthetic, is he? There never was any nonsense of that kind about Jim."

"Did you see anything of the Stone and Schimmerling party, Jim, at Bendore?" asked Lord George.

"They had left just before I got there. They are coming on here, are they not?" There was a slight tone of eagerness in his voice.

Lord George nodded in rather a knowing manner, and patted his cousin on the shoulder.

"Never fear, my dear Jim."

"What the deuce do you mean?" asked the Colonel sharply.

"Oh," said Sir John, answering for his guest, "it seems the General and his charming daughter are friends of Lord George's. Nice old fellow, the General, isn't he? with his white hair and moustaches and pleasant manners—quite one of the old school—my ideal, Colonel, of what I believe yon speak of in the service as an officer and a gentleman!"

"Ahem!" said Lord George Vivash.

"You said, Lord George?" asked the host, who seemed at times a little hard of hearing.

"I said, 'and Von Bauer, a nice fellow too—in a different way.'"

"Yes, yes!" said Sir John, who always liked to make the utmost of any of his guests, "that he is—quite a man of the world, Von Bauer."

"Very much a man of the world," said Lord George.

"He is a man," said Sir John expansively, "who has been everywhere."

"And who is up to most things," added his lordship.

"Just so, Lord George; a man of universal attainments—as you put it so neatly, up to most things."

"And down," said his lordship in a carefully modulated undertone, "down on most people!"

"Charming fellow! Charming fellow!" continued the host. "He is a man whom you will all like, quite a German of the energetic sort, with something of the Bismarck manner, but nothing overbearing—oh dear, no!—a most good-humoured witty person. Well, ladies and gentlemen," Sir John continued, turning to his guests, "and what are our plans for the afternoon? The day is wearing on and the grouse want shoot-

ing. Lady Diana, you shoot with us to-day? And you, Miss Langham?"

"Many thanks, Sir John, but I don't gun."

"Oh," said Sir John, a little puzzled, "you don't *gun?*"

"No," said the young lady, laughing; "I'm no 'gunnist'!"

"Ah! you have no gun? Well, we can manage to——"

"What Miss Langham wishes to convey," said Lord George, "is that she is not *on the shoot* to-day."

"Ah, to be sure; I see!" exclaimed the host. "But you will walk with us, will you not, all the same?"

"Yes, indeed I will. I saw such a delicious colour-harmony in Glen Albyn yesterday, and I'm longing to examine it again—a harmony in gray, red, and purple heathers."

"That would be, I suppose," put in Lord George Vivash, "what our tailors call a heather mixture."

"You may laugh, Lord George; but if you knew what a *trouvaille* I had found in the village shop this morning, you would understand my enthusiasm."

"A *trouvaille*—a find? A bit of old china,

perhaps; or Bruce's claymore, or Rob Roy's pipe-bowl?"

"Nothing of the kind; but some exquisitely toned blue cartridge paper—there was a quarter of a pound of a thing the man called pig-tail in it. Oh, I'm just dying to get to work on it!"

"On the pig-tail?"

"Oh do, please now, be serious. Can't you see that with the end of a burnt stick, a bit of red sealing-wax, a pinch of earth—all quite common, vulgar things, you know—almost endless colour effects may be produced?"

"I should think so, indeed."

"Ah, you are laughing again. You are a sad Philistine, Lord George, I am afraid."

"I am, indeed I am; but you shall instruct me, Miss Langham. Pray now, when you want to draw in black and red and brown on blue paper, where's the merit of not going to Winsor and Newton and buying a few coloured chalks and some blue drawing-paper?"

"Where is the merit? Why, in not going, to be sure. The true canon and the new canon in art is *unexpectedness*. True genius

is inspired to seize on seemingly impossible art materials and vehicles, and to produce seemingly impossible effects with them. We have coined a little word, in the German style of word-building, which conveys all this admirably. We call it the 'unforeseeable-geniusful-materials-seizingness' of art. Is it not good and appropriate?"

"To a degree—and neat and pointed too, beyond everything—the unforeseeable-geniusful—geniusful——?"

"Geniusful-materials-seizingness of art."

"Of art! Capital! capital!" cried his lordship, "and I dare say now this new art departure has led to some startling developments."

"That is just what has happened," and Miss Langham laughed; "oh, the world is such a poor stupid, humdrum old world, anything new—any touch of genius—scandalises and horrifies it. The poor Philistines! one is sorry for them, they are quite harmless and mean well, and one shouldn't laugh, really."

"But one can't help oneself, though!" suggested Lord George.

"One really can't! Do let me tell you a little story in point—shall I?"

"Do."

"Well then! it was an acquaintance, a young artist with a real genius, and he made an early call one day on a lady in Mayfair. As he came to the door, the butcher's boy with a tray of meat was standing in his blue coat and apron at the area rails. The artist's mind grasped in an instant the lovely harmonies of blue, gray, and carnations; he carried the whole thing, for he was an *impressioniste*, my friend—you know what that is, of course?"

Lord George nodded.

"And he told me the story himself. He carried, I say, the butcher and his tray upstairs——"

"Good heavens! Did he really, though?"

"I mean, of course, in his mind's eye—the impression they had made on him—upstairs into the lady's drawing-room, a neat, pretty room enough, but not 'advanced art' at all. The lady was not there for the moment. He was tormented with the idea of the lovely picture in his head—how was he to give it expression? He looked round. On the writing-table, by a lucky chance, were two bottles of ink, red and black. Over the mantelpiece, a great bald looking-glass

in an excruciating gilt frame. Imagine, Sir John, you who have art feeling—imagine, Lady Diana, the hideous monstrosity of such a thing! An inspiration seized my young friend. To put out the two inks into separate Sèvres saucers, and to transfer the image in his mind by their means on the glass, was the affair of a few moments. The blue coat and apron of the butcher presented a difficulty. My friend conquered it. One of those painfully, almost shamefully aniline blue-bound novels lay on the table, and near it a bottle of eau-de-cologne. He tore off the binding of the book, soaked it in the spirit——"

"I see!" exclaimed Lord George, "'the geniusful-materials-seizingness of art.'"

"Exactly; and he had a lovely blue pigment at once in his hand. The picture was finished in less than ten minutes, and the lady entered the room as the last dab of deep blue was being applied, with her ball of Berlin wool, to the butcher's apron. She was——"

"Delighted?" suggested Lord George.

"No, my dear lord, startled, horrified, and scandalised! She complained that her room had been turned upside down, her white

marble mantelpiece stained with red and black ink, and her mirror daubed and dirtied all over. Yes, sir, that's how she put it!"

"The poor lady had not accepted that new art canon?" suggested Lord George.

"She had not, sir. My friend was naturally very indignant. 'I have done you, ma'am,' he said, 'two great services to-day. I have relieved you of the bald unmeaning countenance of a Philistine looking-glass, and I have presented you, ma'am, with a noble work of art in its place, and you do not thank me; no, ma'am.' He took up his hat, made the lady a low bow, and left the house."

Lord George did not seem quite so much impressed with the æsthetic moral conveyed in this story as he might have been.

"Ah, Lord George," cried the young American lady, "I fear you are little more than a Philistine yourself; but a day of enlightenment — of *aufklärung* — will come and then——"

"Of *auf*——? That was a hard word, Miss Langham. I'm sure it means something quite awful! Here is Colonel Tremayne, now; he is an artist, and reads German metaphysics."

He introduced his cousin to the young lady, and she seemed glad of the chance of having a more sympathetic listener than the cynical Lord George.

"An artist, Colonel Tremayne? Oh, I am so glad! I must positively show you that 'bit' on the moors, which I was talking to your cousin about. It is near Glen Albyn, where we are to lunch—a corrie, I think they call it—where the gray and purple heather make quite a—quite a——"

"A symphony," suggested her new acquaintance.

"Oh, how very clever of you!" exclaimed Miss Langham, with extraordinary enthusiasm; "how exactly that is the right word—a 'symphony!'—and after lunch I will take you to see it."

Sir John came up. "I am really very sorry, Miss Langham, to interfere, but we positively cannot do without Colonel Tremayne to-day on the moors."

"I have not my guns, Sir John, till my man drives over with my things. I'm sorry I can't shoot to-day."

The gentleman who was a remarkable performer across country now joined the group. He walked with some stiffness about

the knees, as of a man just dismounted after a long ride, and turned out his right elbow as if he usually carried a jockey whip in the hand of that arm. He was rather a concise than a fluent talker, and his voice was extremely husky.

"If—er—I can be of any use, I'm sure—most delighted. I've a second gun up here—Rigby No. 10—choke with left barrel—believe would just come up to Colonel—er—Tremayne's shoulder. Quite at his service, I'm sure."

"Very many thanks, Captain——"

"Shendy," said that gentleman.

"Captain Shendy, it is very kind of you, and if I'm wanted I certainly will accept your offer."

But Lord George had something very particular to say to his cousin, and wanted to say it as soon as possible. He put in his word for the new-comer's company.

"Sir John, I rather think my cousin has had walking enough for one day, and if you'll let me, I'll stay at home and have a talk with him; we've a good deal to say, and we can join you on the moors at lunch time."

Sir John agreed, but there was still another claimant upon Colonel Tremayne's time and

company. A tall, narrow-shouldered man, Professor Dredge, as plain-featured a man as it was possible for one with so intellectual a face to be. The Professor slouched up and said:

"There is a very curious Peel tower in the neighbourhood of Glen Albyn, where it appears we are to have lunch; if Colonel Tremayne"—the Professor stopped to bow in an angular manner, after the fashion of middle-aged professors—"if Colonel Tremayne could spare half-an-hour to examine it with me, he would—er—" ("what is coming next?" thought the Colonel) "he would be conferring an inestimable service upon me and upon—ah—archæological science."

"Indeed!" said the Colonel.

"Yes; we are trying, in fact *I* am trying, to establish a sort of connection—a connection you will understand, Colonel Tremayne, growing out of the Aryan theory of races—between the primitive fortified places of the Western Highlands and those of the highlands of Western Asia.

"I see the whole thing," said Colonel Tremayne, "and I shall be delighted to give you my poor opinion."

Sir John was glad to find his traveller and millionaire in such high favour with his guests. He addressed the whole party collectively, and as he was going to make one of those little pleasant and hospitable speeches for which he considered, and considered rightly, that he had something of a special talent, he mounted five or six of the stairs leading to the gallery, and addressed them from that height as from a platform.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to amuse ourselves, and you will please me best by pleasing yourselves. For my part I have to drive to the station to meet the Countess and her party. I shall take them to Glen Albyn to lunch. Remember, ladies and gentlemen, we rendezvous at Glen Albyn."

Sir John walked up the short flight of stairs, turned to bow courteously to his guests on reaching the gallery, and disappeared through one of the several doors.

The party broke up cheerfully with laughing and talking, and the members of it, all but the Colonel and Lord George, followed their host's example, and ascending the stairs passed through one or other of the gallery doors.

CHAPTER IV.

LORD GEORGE and his cousin were left together. They stood for a time facing each other in silence. Two men of the same age, and with a certain family resemblance between them, but presenting nevertheless the strongest contrast one with the other. The one born a poor man with the fight of life before him from his boyhood, who had made the fight now and won it, and who bore marks of the struggle in the lines of a face set resolutely to bear the heat and burden of the day and to dare its dangers.

The other man, rich by the accident of a legacy, with high courtesy rank, and without even any of the responsibilities upon him of rank. Life from its beginning had been made smooth for him. Too smooth: he had fallen into a sybarite's ways, less from

inclination than because a very strong effort would have been required to set him in the line of any other course in life. It had not been in his training to put compulsion upon himself to make any such effort, and he was content to follow, as mathematicians phrase it, the line of least resistance. He bore in the smoother and softer lines of his face and figure the signs of a life too easy and too indolent. Such indolence ages a man, and Lord George, bearded and inclining already to stoutness, was by much the older-looking man of the two.

Their moral characters were as contrasted as their physical appearance. By that not uncommon inconsistency between cause and effect, the man whom fate had treated unkindly was the kindlier critic of life of the two, and the one for whom the world had the brightest illusions; the man who had nothing to complain of in his lot, and least cause of anyone to rail at the world, was a railer, a confirmed cynic, and almost a pessimist.

Between the two cousins, so different in every way, a strong liking and friendship had always existed. Their friendship and companionship dated from their boyhood.

Jim Tremayne had always been something of a hero to his cousin, even from their school days; and the man whose experience of the world of men and women was only gained by fits and starts in his professional leisure times, never failed to respect his rich cousin's wider worldly knowledge and keener worldly wisdom.

In their family, on the male side at least, undemonstrativeness was held to be something of a virtue, and the two friends and cousins who had been apart for so long a time gave no outward expression of any particular pleasure in coming together again.

"Well, Jim!" said his cousin.

"Well!"

"Awfully glad to see you back, Jim, you know."

"Thanks. I'm devilish glad to see you again, old fellow."

There was a pause, and a certain tension perhaps in the situation. Lord George relieved it by taking out his cigar-case, opening it, and silently extending it towards his cousin.

Tremayne chose a large regalia.

"Got a light?" he asked.

Lord George struck a vesuvian. Tremayne

lighted his cigar. His cousin did the same. Neither of the men uttered a word till a broad red glow had been established at the end of each of their cigars. Then Lord George spoke.

"By Jove, old man, it's five years since——"

He did not finish the sentence, and there was another pause.

"By Jove, yes, George, it is five years!"

Conversation again languished.

"I say, Jim," said his lordship with apparently a sudden inspiration, "what did you go there for?"

"Where? To Bendore's?"

"To Bendore's! No, to—that place."

"Shooting chiefly."

"Then you had a precious long shoot."

"Yes," answered his cousin, with a deliberation that was almost a drawl, "I had."

"Let us see. Where was it you went? Beloo—what is it?"

"Beloo—chis—tan."

"Why, that's somewhere beyond Persia; is it not?"

"Somewhere about there, more or less."

"Well, I know it's south-east of Persia."

"I say, George, you've been getting at a geography book."

"I'd do more than that for you, old fellow. Well, and what did you do in—in those diggings?"

"I told you."

"I know; but what else."

"Oh, a lot of things."

Lord George appeared vexed. "Look here, Jim, why the deuce can't you say what you've been at all this time? People are bothering me to know, and then I can't say, and—and—hang it all! you know it makes a man look a fool. People say: 'Why, we always thought you and Jim were such pals; you don't really mean to say you don't know?' 'Deuce a bit!' I have to answer. 'I'm not in his confidence.' Well, you know, I call that rather rough on me; don't you think it is now, yourself?"

"So it is, George, by Jove! so it is. So the next time you are asked, you can say this, and it is the truth: I went into Beloochistan one day, five years ago, because I was tired of doing nothing on a frontier station. I went for a month's tiger-shooting; I stayed because I liked the people. They are very wild, and some of them are dangerous, but they are mostly gentlemen and always hospitable; that is, if they don't begin by

cutting your throat. So as our Government wanted a report on the country, I volunteered to make it, and then I stayed on and on."

"Well, and when you had done your report, what kept you among those savages?"

"Oh, I found work that I liked—engineer's work—in my own line; you know how fond I always was of my profession. I fortified their towns, made them canals and weirs, taught them how to drain their marshes, and converted square miles of bog and moor into fertile corn-land. Then I drilled their troops, and once or twice, when there was a row, I led them into action."

"Well, but, my dear fellow, what a waste of time and chances! Five years! What a slice out of a man's life, eh?"

"Think so, George? Why, I tell you I was at work all the time. Oh, I forgot! you are an idle man; you don't know the pleasure of hard work; you only know the pleasure of amusing yourself—much the poorest fun of the two!"

"Ah, I dare say! Wait till you try. Another thing, Jim, will you tell me? Did you make your pile out there? For myself, you know, it does not matter a bit whether you did or not, except so far as you yourself

are concerned; but I think you ought to know there's a story going about that you were coining money all the time."

"Money! Why, there's none there to coin. They haven't got such a thing."

"I thought as much; but there's a rumour about—too absurd a story it is, but that silly American girl was full of it this morning—that you had brought over whole chests full of gold and silver coin!"

"Oh, it's a hungry place. A few Company's rupees and some old Portuguese moidores are about the only coins I ever saw there."

"Then do you know, Jim," said his cousin gravely, "that the straight thing for you to do is to contradict the report; let people know you haven't made a fortune."

"I don't see the necessity," said Colonel Tremayne.

"But you must, I tell you. Oh, it's all very well for you to shake your head. Come now, one question more."

"Go ahead."

"Was there really nothing more than a month's tiger-shooting to drive you among a set of cut-throats, and keep you away from your friends for five years?"

"Perhaps there was."

"It was a woman, wasn't it?"

"You think so?"

"Where there's a worry there's always a woman."

"That's a new proverb, I think," suggested Tremayne.

"A new proverb! it's about the oldest saying in the world. In this case I guess her name."

"Well, perhaps you might. Whom do you take her to be?"

Vivash paused a little before he answered. "The Countess." Tremayne made no sign.

"I know I'm right," said Lord George, "and you are here expecting she was to come too."

"Go ahead!"

"Jim!" cried his cousin with great earnestness, "I am afraid you are making the devil's own mistake! Look here; a lot has happened since you and I met old Stone and his daughter at Baden. He wasn't very straight even then, was he? Shady, eh?"

"There was no harm in Stone. Poor old fellow, he was always so awfully hard up."

"You remember how before you left to join your battalion in India the Stones had got into the Bauer set?"

"Bad lot, that."

"Devilish bad! and that Count Schimmerling, Bauer's cousin, or brother-in-law, or whatever he was, whom Nancy Stone married after you left, was just about the blackest sheep of the lot."

"Poor woman!"

"I really don't know about 'poor woman.' She did it with her eyes open. Women are not forced to marry, out of novels. And now she's a widow, with a title and a jointure. Devilish lucky woman, I should call her!"

"I'm sorry for her."

"Sorry! Ah, I see—I suppose her marrying was what drove you into that wilderness, and now—no, Jim, don't tell me that you've come back intending to make it up again with her."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Simply because you don't know the woman's antecedents. You have lived out of the world, and you are not aware of what she and her people are. Since we all knew them in Baden, the firm——"

"The firm! That's strong, isn't it?"

"I was going to say, the gang. I mean old Stone, his daughter, and that double-

dyed rascal Bauer have been travelling about the Continent professionally till it's too hot to hold them. Now I suppose they've come to try their luck upon us in England."

"Is it as bad as that, George? Cards?"

"Cards, my dear fellow! They're a peg above cards now. That was all very well when Bauer legged me at Baden. It's what they call 'high finance' now—bogus companies, sham government concessions, bulling the fishiest foreign loans, and doing all the dirty work between the rogues who want to borrow money and the fools who want to lend it."

"You don't mean to say that poor old Stone——"

"Yes, I do. I mean to say that Stone is either the accomplice or the tool of one of the biggest swindlers going."

"You want to prove too much. I admit that Bauer is a blackguard. I never doubted it from the first. But what can a quiet old gentleman like the General, or such a fine lady as I am told the Countess has become, do to help a fellow like Bauer?"

Lord George gave his cousin a look of amused commiseration. "You're not in it, Jim. Do you know what a 'stale' is?"

"More or less."

"Well, that's what your friends the General and the Countess have become. They decoy the game; Bauer pots the birds."

"Poor woman!"

"Upon my word, you've got an easy-going way of looking at things! So you really think a woman can be the wife of one swindler and the constant companion of another, and not be the accomplice and confederate of both?"

"I think *she* could. You see, George, you never quite understood Miss Stone's character. Hers was a peculiar nature."

"Peculiar fiddlesticks! Please don't be led away by romantic bosh like that. There are some plain rules of life; everyone knows them. If either a man or a woman doesn't choose to conform to these rules, one draws one's own conclusions. Don't be humbugged, Jim!"

Tremayne laughed. "Why not? After all, I am not sure it's not better fun than being so awfully wide awake. Look at you and me, George; you're a cynic and a pessimist—I'm neither. Which gets most fun out of the world? You think half the men and women you meet are idiots and knaves—I

don't. I believe in people till I have found them out."

"Perhaps you believe in Herr Friedrich von Bauer?"

"No; I tell you I had found Bauer out. You see, George, you and I are not quite in the same boat. You have got nine thousand a year and can afford to be a cynic. You can afford to rub the gilt off your gingerbread. I can't. I eat all the gingerbread I can get with the gilt on."

"You don't think, perhaps, that you may be taking rather too rose-coloured a view of life, do you, Jim, and that you may wake up some day and find there was a good deal of —let us say—green in the rose-colour?"

"No, I don't. I think on the whole the world is a very fair sort of a world if one takes it the right way. Why, look at my own case. See what a reception people have given me, and what have I done to deserve it?"

Lord George looked at his cousin with some curiosity and amusement, but made him no answer.

"I disappear for five years and come back with nothing to show for it—a disappointed adventurer, for aught that anyone

knows; a pauper wanting to borrow five pounds, for all the world can tell, and just see how much they make of me—well, you saw yourself!" Colonel Tremayne spoke with kindling animation. "Sir John Smith, a man I only just knew at my club; and that fellow Shendy wanting to lend me his gun; and that scientific swell, Dredge, so civil; and that nice American girl who draws; and it was just the same at Bendore's, and—and by Jove, sir, I say it's a magnificent world."

Lord George leant back in his chair, folded his arms, and regarded his cousin with an expression such as that with which a savant might contemplate some newly-found and curious specimen of natural history. When he spoke, his measured tones were in singular contrast with the enthusiasm of Tremayne.

"It's such a magnificent world that do you know what I would do, if I were you?"

"What?"

"I'd get out of it as quick as I could. I'd emigrate. I'd borrow ten thousand pounds, and I'd go and buy an estate in Virginia or New Zealand. Ten thousand pounds out there would make you as happy as a king, and as independent as a patriarch."

"No doubt it would; but where are the ten thousand pounds to come from?"

"Oh," said his cousin lightly, "I could manage that for you very easily. It so happens that I have the very sum by me, and didn't know what the deuce to do with it. I should be too glad to let you have it."

"You would?" cried Tremayne excitedly. "Damn it! Look at that, now! Was I not right? Didn't I say it was a magnificent world when a fellow is ready to give his cousin such a lump of money as that—for it would come to giving, you know, George; you could not expect ever to see a penny of it again. You know that."

"Will you have it, my dear fellow, and buy an estate in Virginia?"

"Eh?" said Tremayne, who seemed a little taken aback by the suddenness of the proposal. "Well, no; I'll wait a bit first, I think."

"You won't go at once?"

"No, not quite at once. Why should I?"

"I'll tell you why you should. Because, my dear Jim, without meaning it and without knowing it, you are here under false pretences."

"How under false pretences?"

"People think you a millionaire, and you are not one."

"Nonsense! They can't think it seriously; they've nothing to go upon."

"I never said they had; I never said they weren't idiots; but they think you a millionaire nevertheless, and—well, if you must have it out, they treat you accordingly."

"What! you think people like me on that account? I can't believe it. Hang it all! if I did, I think I would emigrate. Well! I'll give them a chance of letting me see if they are such mercenary brutes as you make out."

"You won't have long to wait," said Lord George, laughing.

"How so?"

"Why, as soon as the Stone and Bauer party come they'll publish the true story. They don't belong to the idiotic section of mankind. It's their business to find out who has and who has not got his pockets lined, and they have found out all about you, as I know. They were with me at a place in Aberdeenshire a week ago, and they were exploding the story of your fortune-making. They won't be here ten minutes before they let our host and his guests into the secret."

"Pshaw, George! you really carry being a cynic too far. What can it possibly matter to Sir John if I'm rolling in wealth or living on my half-pay? What can Shendy care, or Miss Langham, or old Dredge, or any of them?"

"Why should they care? Ha, ha! my dear Jim, that's what I call a problem in social metaphysics. Do you really want the answer?"

"Yes, in three words."

"Well, I'll put it in this way; society is a round game—rank, manners, cleverness, tact, good looks, and money are the counters we play it with. Some fish score one, some six, some twelve, and you'll find money in these days the counter that scores about highest of any. Nobody is fool enough or impostor enough nowadays to go on moralising or pretending that money is dross, and so on. We all know its value too well in the game. And, let me tell you, if you haven't got an uncommonly good pile of that particular counter to start with, you're not in the game at all, and you'd much better get up and leave the table, and make room for some one who has."

Tremayne looked serious: "If people are

such cold and calculating brutes as that—— but I can't believe it of them."

"You can't?" Vivash rose from his seat and threw away the end of his cigar. "Then come up to Glen Albyn, it is about lunch time; the Bauer lot will have come by now, and we will see which of us two is right."

"You're not quite consistent, George; if you think the world is made up of such mercenary hypocrites as that, why do you stay in it? Why don't you buy an estate in Virginia yourself?"

"Oh, I can tell you that. I said it was a calculating world, and of course therefore it's a hypocritical one, but I never said it was not an amusing world. Yes, I like the comedy of life, and I stay to see it played out because I have a front seat."

"A front seat?"

"It's rather a plain way of putting it, and of course I wouldn't speak so plainly to anyone but you; but you see I've got nine thousand a year, and if that doesn't constitute having a seat in the orchestra stalls I don't know what does. So on the whole I'll stay and see the play out. Let's go up to Glen Albyn and see a bit of it now, shall we?"

"All right," said Tremayne, and the two men sauntered out of the room, took their hats and sticks outside, and passed through the gravelled quadrangles of Glen Cruachan House, by the long beds and borders of scarlet geranium and calceolaria that edged the gray walls of the house, threaded the winding paths among the laurel groves, and passed round the broad clumps of bending deodars and dark green upstanding thujas and junipers, and were presently crossing the bleaker region of moorland and mountain on the way to Glen Albyn.

CHAPTER V.

THEY ascended a long reach of rolling moorland; a monotonous tract of gray ling and purple heather unrelieved by any other variety of vegetation, a windy upland prairie, where the only life was the little red and brown whin-bird that flitted on in front of them, the kestrel falcon that held its station aloft against the strong breeze with fluttering pinions, like a ship lying to with its sails shaking in the breeze, and now and then the whirr of a grouse or black-cock rising from the heather at their feet.

They had walked nearly two miles on rising ground before the landscape changed from gritty earth between the heather to continuous solid rock, which rose in the form of a mountain precipitously before them. They climbed it and passed through a narrow defile near its summit. Suddenly Glen Albyn opened out before their eyes.

It was one of those surprises which are only encountered in mountainous districts. They were standing at the head of a long and narrow valley whose sides were steep limestone cliffs, crested with peaks and pinnacles, of rock that cut the sky-line grotesquely on either side. Through the midst of the glen dashed and cascaded from ledge to ledge of rock a good-sized brook, its water-plashed banks thickly overgrown with bracken and green lady-fern. Wherever root-hold was afforded on the cliff, larches and Scotch firs grew luxuriantly, and feathered in places down to the moving waters of the brook, their deep and tender green contrasting here and there with the silvery foliage of the white-barked birch trees.

At the farther extremity of this luxuriant and beautiful valley, in a green-turfed recess, amphitheatre-shaped with walls of the living rock, were gathered the whole party of ladies and gentlemen from Glen Cruachan.

Lord George, out of breath with the sharp climb, stopped for a few minutes' rest as they came in view of the luncheon party. He took from his pocket one of those small telescopes which are used in deer-stalking.

"They have come," he said; "I see the

Countess, there is no mistaking her, she has always her circle of admirers and listeners around her; and there is the old General, with his everlasting black frock-coat and gray tweed trousers; and Von Bauer—he has grown stouter, I think—he is got up in gray knickerbockers and a black velvet coat; you can always find out these fellows by some little trick of that sort."

Tremayne took the glass in his turn, and looked for some time in silence. "There are some new arrivals, too," he said as he gave it back.

"Yes," said his cousin, looking again, "I see there are; the Longbows, husband and wife. She is pretty and rather nice; he is gentleman-like—to look at—and something in the City."

"Rich?"

"No; rising, and trying to get out of their own set. Common thing enough. That extensive object against the rock must be Madame de la Pretentaine. Nothing else in nature could be so big and so gaudy."

"Who is she?"

"The widow of the Marquis de la Pretentaine; supposed to be the best dressed woman in Europe."

"Never heard of her."

"You astonish me. She goes about everywhere. No gentleman's country house is complete without her, as the critics used to say of their friends' books. I wonder you never met her at nice houses in Beloochistan."

"Clever?"

"Stupid to a degree—beyond dress and people's genealogies. She is very popular in Scotland and Germany."

Lord George looked again. "Ah," he said, "I think I see some very odd people, the Bents, whom people are talking of just now. Dr. Bent; perhaps you have heard of him."

"No."

"He was a surgeon at some treaty port in China, who went in for some 'ology, I forget which, and had a third-rate reputation in science. Not satisfied with that, he has gone in for Chinese metaphysics, and has written a book, or is going to, to prove that Confucius could give points to Plato and Kant. I really don't know much about it, but abstruse, I believe, is not the word for his ideas, and Bent is a mystery himself; he never talks, is always meditating; but his wife makes up for it, and she lets drop a crumb of Chinese

philosophy now and then which excites half the silly people in London."

Sir John prided himself on his lunches on shooting days. Not only were there many very good things to eat and drink, but there were all sorts of pretty and ingenious appliances. There were crowds of servants in livery; gillies in kilts stood picturesquely grouped in the background, holding the setters in leashes, with the guns piled in front of them, and the black and red game and white mountain hares artistically heaped on the ground. The rocky ground was spread here and there with small square Eastern carpets, or with the skins of bear, tiger, and leopard. The taste might not be of the very best, but the general effect was unquestionably magnificent.

The person who formed the centre of the group of ladies and gentlemen was the Countess von Schimmerling. She had every right to be the centre of any group, for she was an exceedingly pretty woman, most beautifully dressed in the latest fashion, and with a great deal of that artificial manner which some critics (who do not possess it) call worldly, and entirely disapprove.

She was one of those women whom men choose to consider particularly helpless, and think it essential to make a great ado about, though, to the eyes of other women, they seem perfectly well able to take care of themselves.

The gentler and more critical sex—more critical, that is, where their sisters are concerned—though constrained to admire and sometimes to envy the Countess, did certainly not invariably like her or wholly approve her ways, and their criticism took the form of insinuating, first, that she was affected, which seemed true on the face of it; secondly, that she spoke English at times with a foreign accent—itself a most absurd affectation, considering that she was born and bred an Englishwoman. "It is all put on," said Lady Diana; "she was as simple and nice as could be when she was Nancy Stone." Lastly, it was said against her that she was never happy but when she was making fools of a number of men, and compelling them to do small and silly services for her. She did not much care who the men were, it was alleged, so long as they were obedient enough and devoted enough.

The women on this occasion were as usual

engaged in their criticisms upon the Countess to the above effect; while the men, deserting them wholly, were devoting themselves to the Countess's comfort.

"It is too dreadful of her," said the pretty Mrs. Longbow, watching the repetition of this foolish proceeding on the part of the gentlemen of the party.

"There's safety in numbers," said Lady Diana consolingly.

"Oh, but," said Mrs. Longbow, "she is a dreadful flirt too; I remember once——"

But as Mrs. Longbow's imagination was known to be stronger than her memory, it was felt her remark would be no reinforcement to the party of criticism, and she was not listened to or allowed to proceed by the female committee.

In the meantime the Countess, apparently exhausted with the effort of walking a short quarter of a mile from the carriage, had sunk into a low-backed garden chair.

"You are sure you are quite comfortable, dear Countess?" asked Sir John, with an air as if the future peace and comfort of his life depended on the well-being of his guest.

"Thanks very much," she said in a

languishing voice, "yes, I think I am. You are all so very kind!"

She looked round gratefully on the group of men who stood round about her—Professor Dredge, Captain Shendy, Mr. Longbow, Dr. Bent the thinker, and the husband of Lady Diana Follett; every one of whom, even the General her father, and Von Bauer her brother-in-law, had been drawn into the magic circle of her attraction.

"Nothing more?" asked Sir John, thinking he still detected in his fair guest's eyes a certain wistful expression.

She did not reply for a moment, but fixed her double eyeglass on a large rounded stone that protruded from the mossy turf near her feet.

"Yes!" exclaimed Sir John eagerly, interpreting the tacit suggestion, "of course! I know what you want, that stone for a footstool. How stupid of us not to think of it before! Captain Shendy, do you think—Professor Dredge, could we not lift——?"

"Of course we can!" cried the two men in a breath, and they threw themselves gallantly upon the stone, got a fair purchase of it with their hands, and heaved with a strong united effort. Quite ineffectually, however, did they

try to lift the stone from the ground: It was too deeply imbedded in the earth to move. They stopped to take breath.

Lady Diana came up and encouraged them: "One effort more, gentlemen, and it yields!" There was a trace of irony in her tone.

"No, it doesn't," cried Captain Shendy, losing patience.

General Stone stood by, calm, collected, and critical, smiling at the disappointment of the two men, but giving no helping hand himself. "Now then, gentlemen," he cried, "both together! One, two, three!"

The two gentlemen prepared to make one more last desperate attempt upon the stone. It failed. Captain Shendy's hat fell off, and something having a distant resemblance to a muttered oath escaped from his lips as he replaced the fallen hat upon his head. The Professor took off his, and wiped his brow; a cleverer man than the gentleman-jockey, he turned off his discomfiture with a scientific pleasantry.

"It is my opinion," he said, "that this stone is part of the tertiary formation of the district, and consequently——"

"Ay, ay!" said the General in his caustic

manner, "not, I suppose, what you geologists call a wandering boulder—eh, Professor?"

"Is this really all that science can do for me?" asked the Countess, with a sweet look at the savant.

"No, madam!" cried that gentleman gallantly, and with the greatest readiness he took up a small footstool which stood near by, and placed it at the lady's feet.

"Oh, thanks, so very much, and now——" she was not even yet quite settled and comfortable, and she looked inquisitively at Sir John, who held a cushion in his hand in rather a purposeless way. By a happy divination of her wishes, he placed it at her back as she leant forward for a moment. "Exactly!" she said, "the very thing I wanted to ask for."

This little scene and the foolish subserviency of the men so irritated Lady Diana that she expressed her determination to start off to meet her brother and cousin, who might, she thought, have lost their way to Glen Albyn.

It was clear that she and her sister critics were not unjustified in their strictures, and that the Countess von Schimmerling, born plain Nancy Stone, was well pleased when she made men her satellites and servitors,

that she regarded numbers more even than persons, and, in place of better men to make to surrender to her charms, put up with a retired ironmaster, a gentleman-jockey, a philosopher, two relatives, two very commonplace gentlemen, and a dried-up scientist. Therein indeed not departing from the great ideal and prototype of all such charm-possessing and men-vanquishing women, the golden-haired Aphrodite, who, mythologists tell us, when she cannot harness to her victorious chariot, as coursers through the air, a team of white-winged doves, is content to be drawn by a flock of more humble and homely sparrows.

"Now that we are all comfortably settled," cried Sir John — his solicitude for the Countess had for once carried him to overlook the requirements of his other guests, not one of whom was in point of fact yet either seated or settled at all—"now, I say, that we are all comfortably settled—won't you sit down, Miss Langham? By-the-bye, where are Lord George and Colonel Tremayne? Lady Diana gone to meet them, ay, ay! Tremayne, yes, Colonel Tremayne is a sort of a hero, you know, Countess. By-the-bye, do you know him?"

The Countess answered lightly: "Oh yes! I know Colonel Tremayne."

"Indeed! Met him since his return, of course—since he became a lion; he was quite a nobody before that."

"We met, Colonel Tremayne and I, at Baden, about five years ago."

The Countess's accent and general affectation in making this short statement was remarked upon by the ladies present as being most marked and most excessive.

Herr von Bauer, who the moment before had been holding forth with great volubility to others of the party, and with that thick German accent which always added so much point and emphasis to his observations, seemed to be attracted by the mention of Colonel Tremayne's name. He joined in the conversation.

"Boor fellow!" he exclaimed, with a most expressive shrug of his shoulders. "Boor fellow!"

Sir John laughed. "Poor fellow! Well, ha, ha! no, hardly *poor* fellow, Herr von Bauer; a millionaire, my dear sir, nothing less than a millionaire."

"Ha, ha! Goot! Fery goot!"

Sir John Smith was so taken aback by this ironically expressed disbelief of so shrewd a judge as Bauer of the genuineness of his guest's financial soundness that his utterance actually failed him for a moment, and he gasped out incoherently: "Hey!—why—you don't surely mean to say that——"

Herr von Bauer's tone became lofty and yet condescending. "Oh, I would nefer! Honest Boferty! I esteem her. But—bah! to bretend — to, as you call it. Sham! That"—he shook his head and expressed virtuous repugnance—"that is not raight!"

"Oh come, you know, Herr, that won't do. Tremayne's worth his hundred thousand pounds at the very least. Why, I have it on good authority that he brought over as much as that in gold mohurs, in a great Indian chest."

"Then our vriend lose his chest in der sea, or perhaps he had her seized in a foreign custom-house. He never landed her in England, my goot Sir John Schmitz."

"How do you know that?" Sir John was hoping now against hope.

The German laid his finger against his nose; the gesture was neither dignified nor

of a high refinement, but it expressed a knowingness against which Sir John felt it impossible to hope or argue any further.

"How do I know? Why, fery well. He borrow two hondert pounds of a City vriend of mine a month ago on his own personal segurity. Does a man with a boxful of gold borrow money at twenty-five per cent.? Nefer!"

The guests had gathered round Sir John and Bauer as this dialogue was taking place, and a silence fell upon them, and a blank look of consternation and of indignation even, as of people listening to a tale of gross deception, of iniquity laid bare, and fraud exposed. Even the General, whose outlook upon life was usually calm and unemotional, allowed himself to be moved.

"Tut, tut, tut!" he said. "Dear me, now! Very bad, very bad indeed!"

The host himself could contend no more against the terrible truth; a gross deception had been practised upon him and his guests, and he could only deplore it.

"Ay, ay," he said in a tone almost of suffering, "I am very sorry, ladies and gentlemen—upon my word, I am sorry to hear this. If I had had but a suspicion

that my guest was here upon false pretences——"

The guests were silent, but it was easy to read their feelings of disappointment on their faces. No one said a good word for the absent Colonel.

At last some attempt at a defence came from a quite unexpected quarter. In a tone of contemptuous indifference and in her most affected foreign accent, the Countess said:

"Has Colonel Tremayne then pretended to be better off than he is? Oh, I don't know—perhaps he has?"

"Pretended!" cried the host, "why, perhaps not exactly pretended, but——"

It was a delicate question of morals, and General Stone felt that he was peculiarly fit to apprehend and to deal with such points with the subtlety they required.

"To be sure, my dear Nancy. Has he ever pretended? No, of course not. It saves everything. Colonel Tremayne is a man of honour, he would not think of pretending; but—he—has—perhaps allowed—permitted himself—a certain air—is that not so, Sir John?—of taking credit, as it were, of imposing himself on us in a way. It is

a *nuance*, a shade, and perhaps I wrong him."

"No, begad! General," cried their north-country host sturdily, as from a more uncompromising moral standpoint, "you are too good-natured, you explain him away. I call it most improper, most unpardonable behaviour."

The Countess went on, but in a tone of such indifference that it seemed as if she was taking one side in a controversy, rather because no one else was advocating it, than as if she were arguing against any sort of personal injustice done: "Are the penniless then always to proclaim themselves penniless?"

"No, my dear Nancy——" began her father.

The lady perhaps saw that her case from the conventional point of view was a strong one, and she pressed the argument now with some increase of warmth, perhaps quite as much from the pleasure that all people with a faculty of pointed and voluble utterances take in exercising that gift on the stronger side, as from any abstract feeling that she was doing a generous thing in defending an absent person.

"Is there to be no standard but the standard of wealth?" she asked. "Is a man who has lived a life of adventure among savages for years, carried his life in his hand, served his Queen and his country well—is such a man to be slighted and made light of because—because he has overdrawn his banker's account?"

There was a good deal of force in the Countess's pleading, and General Stone felt that his insinuated charges were but flimsy in contrast with it. He smiled, and shrugged his shoulders; he abandoned his first argument, and approached the subject from the standpoint of expediency.

"It is the way of the world, my dear Nancy; it is simply deplorable, no doubt, but what can we do? Living in the world, we must conform to its way."

"As a practical man," cried Sir John, "I should say it was a very sensible way, too, and the surest proof, in my opinion, that a man has brains, merit—yes, I will say it—and morals, too, is that he should have a good balance in his banker's books."

"Soh!" cried the German. "Money, what is he?—tross; but also is he the currency of soziety; without him we are no longer mem-

bers of soziety—we are peggars. Let us by all means be charitable to our peggars, let us by all means feed, clothe, and, if they require it, gomfort them; bot"—with an eloquent sweep of his hand—"let them know their places!"

"Hear, hear!" cried all the men in unison.

Von Bauer continued, with increased warmth of conviction: "Let them not claim to mingle with us who are the *élite* of the earth; let a line be trawn, and if they presume to bass it——"

"Let us scout them!" cried Sir John.

"Let us sgout them from our bresence."

The Countess smiled; she had regained her habitual air of affected composure, and seemed now quite inclined to allow her quixotic objections to be overruled, and to let herself be carried along by the current of general opinion.

"A hard philosophy," she said, "is it not? Professor Dredge, do you agree with it?"

"Indeed I do, Countess. It conforms entirely with the latest developments of science." He was talking now in that tone of rather grim scientific pleasantry which had gained him a small social reputation:

"We may call it the law of the survival of the richest."

"Ha, ha! very good, Professor!" exclaimed the host, "upon my word, very good! Ha, ha!"

Miss Langham too approved: "Yes, how exceedingly clever — the survival of the richest!"

Mrs. Longbow too was entirely on the side of the majority. So was Madame de la Pretentaine, and so was the wife of the great thinker, who descended from the empyrean to say:

"Quite an epigram, I declare—the survival of the richest—and oh, so true!"

Any other conversation, epigrammatic, moral, or otherwise, was interrupted at this point by the appearance upon the scene of the subject of it himself, in company with his two cousins.

A silence fell upon the whole party. Their faces grew serious and watchful; there was an air of expectancy among them.

Colonel Tremayne walked up to General Stone, and shook hands with him. The General responded smilingly, and even with some show of cordiality. Colonel Tremayne then turned to Von Bauer, and advanced

towards him with outstretched hand. The German either did not recognise him, or if it was that he was affecting non-recognition, he did it with considerable skill.

"You don't remember me, Herr von Bauer?" asked Colonel Tremayne slowly, with a quiet smile on his face, and looking him very steadily in the eyes.

Bauer touched his forehead in pantomimic token of forgetfulness. "For the moment," he said, with a strong German accent.

"You don't recollect Colonel——"

"Golonel?"

"Colonel Tremayne and the Maison d'Or at Vienna?"

"Ah, my tear Colonel Tremayne! I regollect—ya, ya! I regollect."

"I rather thought you might," said Tremayne, and he turned from him and approached the Countess. He held out his hand to her too, as if to shake hands with her. She had resumed the attitude of indolent repose in which she had been reclining before she was roused to take part in the controversy on the social and moral value of riches. As Colonel Tremayne came near her she raised her double eye-glass to her eyes, but she made no movement of her hand

towards his extended one, and acknowledged his presence by nothing more than by a very slight inclination of the head. Any approach to a more cordial greeting was clearly so entirely out of the thoughts of the lady, that the new arrival was forced to the very humiliating action of withdrawing his hand. He had begun a sentence cordially, "I am so glad to——" but he saw fit to leave it unfinished, and to cover the awkwardness of the situation with a low bow and the formal words, in the more foreign style of greeting, "Countess von Schimmerling!"

He remained for a moment by her, to give her a chance of speaking; but he found no encouragement, and presently she let fall the eye-glass from her eyes, lay back in her chair, and crossed her delicate, well-gloved hands languidly one over the other. She had plainly signified that she wished the interview to go no further. Colonel Tremayne withdrew.

It was easy, even for a less observant person than the Colonel, to see that some change had come over the company since he had left them two hours before. There was a restraint upon them, the ordinary flow of talk and small jest and easy laughter ran

slower, faces were graver, and each seemed to be waiting for some one else to give an indication of the right line to take.

"Well, Jim," said Lord George, coming near him, "you see I was right. Bauer's got at them. I know it as well as if I had heard him; and they will all be of a mind. Just try, if you still have any curiosity."

"Oh, yes," said Colonel Tremayne, "I want to give them all a fair chance."

Captain Shendy stood close by; Tremayne went up to him.

"By-the-bye, Captain Shendy, you were kind enough to offer me a gun."

"Ye-es, I remember;" the Captain always drawled his words out slowly, and now more slowly than ever, and with a touch of intentional offensiveness in them. "I remember; but I've been thinking, Colonel Tremayne, that gun would be rather too straight in the stock for you."

"Oh, indeed! you are quite right to think of that."

The two men stood for a moment or two facing each other in silence. Captain Shendy was the first to drop his eyes. He edged himself away.

Miss Langham and Professor Dredge were

talking together. The savant had a sprig of bell-heather between his finger and thumb, and with a small pocket lens he was examining it and pointing out its peculiarities to the young lady.

Colonel Tremayne came near, and waiting till the botanical conference was apparently concluded, he addressed the gentleman.

"Professor! Professor Dredge!"

"Yes, sir;" the Professor glanced up for one minute from the plant and then went on to Miss Langham: "You see, Miss Langham, the corolla here is distinctly what we botanists term campanuliform."

"Campanuliform! How exceedingly interesting!" cried the young lady.

"And consequently"—he turned abruptly to Colonel Tremayne—"you were saying, Colonel Tremayne——?"

"About that Peel tower you wanted my opinion of. I shall be quite at your service after lunch."

"The Peel tower! Oh yes, to be sure! Well, do you know I believe I was a little premature in forming that hypothesis I spoke of."

The Colonel did not show any vexation in his face, but he smiled a little and shook his

head, as if in good-humoured reprobation of the ways of scientists generally.

"Ah, Professor, I am afraid you philosophers often are a little premature in forming your theories—and sometimes too," he added in a lower tone, "in abandoning them!" He turned to the young lady: "Miss Langham, how about that view you wished to show me? Would there be time before lunch to——"

Miss Langham interrupted him to clasp her hands together, and to exclaim with gushing vehemence:

"Oh, Colonel Tremayne, I am *so* sorry, but it is quite impossible to-day—such a cloud has come up!"

The Colonel followed the direction of the young lady's eyes to the horizon, and though he could detect no meteorological change whatever in the clear summer atmosphere, he answered with perfect gravity:

"Yes, I see; those clouds will come over at times."

"They will! and it is such a pity, is it not?" cried Miss Langham. She smiled upon him pleasantly, and then she turned to the Professor and went off with him in search of fresh botanical specimens.

Lord George and his sister had been watching these various episodes with a pained sympathy. Lord George came to his cousin's side.

"Jim," he said, "I am sorry for you."

"Oh, I don't care a hang for these people. But Nancy! I would not have believed it of her."

"You see, old fellow, the game is up. Now take my advice, and leave the table."

Colonel Tremayne shook his head.

"What! you won't? Not cured of your illusions yet?"

"You really think," said Tremayne, not answering his cousin directly, "that Nancy —the Countess, cut me because she thought me a pauper?"

"Why, of course she did, like all the rest of them. You are not a profitable acquaintance. Of course they all cut you."

"Now, look here; supposing now—just of course to suppose—I could show them that I was worth a lot of money, do you think they would come round again?"

"Come round again! Certainly they would, every one of them, like hounds to a horn."

"They couldn't," said Tremayne; "it would be indecent."

"Oh, they'd never think of that—they'd come!"

"Not the Countess?"

"She the very first."

"No, George; if I believed that, damn it all, I should give it up. I *would* emigrate."

"Then, my dear old Jim, the sooner you do believe it, the better for you. Come, take my advice and my offer, and go."

"Not quite yet, George. The fact is, I've a last card to play."

Vivash laughed ironically: "Then, by Jove, it's up your sleeve, like one of Bauer's."

There was a look on Tremayne's face which puzzled his cousin for a moment as he answered:

"Not very far off. It's in this pocket. Look here!"

As he spoke he took from the inner breast pocket of his coat a good-sized black steel-bound leather pocket-book. It was attached by a thin metal chain to the inside of the coat. He opened the book deliberately, while Lord George stood by, watching him with an expression in which incredulity as to any practical or satisfactory issue of the situation mingled with an amused expectation of what

might be the next outcome of his cousin's eccentricity.

Colonel Tremayne showed that its leaves were composed of sheets of black wax. He turned them in Lord George's sight.

"Hullo!" cried his lordship, with a sudden start, and in a voice from which all expression but wonder had suddenly disappeared; "Jim, what the devil is this?"

Lord George's exclamation and quick movement had attracted the attention of the other guests. They looked to see what had caused his astonishment, and the sight which their eyes encountered was certainly a very striking one.

It happened that the spot where the luncheon had been laid was in the shadow of the overhanging cliffs of the valley-side, but one single gleam of sunlight penetrated through a cleft high up among the peaks and fell full on the green turf.

Whether by accident or design, Colonel Tremayne had chosen this sunlit spot to stand upon, and as he opened the book, the sun-rays gleamed brightly upon about a dozen unset diamonds of the very largest size, each imbedded separately in the black wax of the pocket-book. He turned one of the leaf-like

divisions of the book, and again the sunlight flashed from the facets of another similar array of white stones, scintillating with green and blue and rosy fire; a third, and a fourth, and a fifth time he turned a leaf, and each time the flash was as when a sword is brandished in the sun.

"Diamonds!" cried his cousin. "Are they yours, Jim?"

"Yes, they are mine. I brought them from where I was, you know."

As he spoke the guests had gathered hastily round him and stood silent, fascinated by the strange and beautiful sight.

"Why," said his cousin, "here's a fortune! Professor Dredge, you are an authority on precious stones, what do you make of them?"

That gentleman put on his spectacles and took the book in his hand.

"Hey! Upon my word, this is wonderful. Here's a king's ransom in diamonds!"

Bauer pressed up eagerly and peered over the Professor's shoulder. The huge spectacles which he put on did not conceal the look of greed in the man's eyes.

Colonel Tremayne quietly resumed possession of the pocket-book as this gentleman drew near.

"Diamondsh!" cried Bauer, "as I live, and pig as nuds!"

General Stone, more reticent in his manner, was almost as deeply interested. He fixed a single eye-glass delicately in the orbit of his eye, as he critically examined the stones. He laughed as he exclaimed:

"Diamonds? Nonsense! they are small rocks!"

Sir John had been a little apart from the rest when the display had first been made; he too hurried up, putting his gold-rimmed double eye-glass in requisition as he came near. A moment's glance satisfied him that there was no mistake in the matter, and there was a breathless tremulousness in his congratulations.

"My dear young friend! This is most—most extraordinary! Do you know that you have simply a—a stupendous capital locked up in these stones?"

"Yes, Sir John, I know it." He glanced at the eager faces round him with a quiet smile.

One face he looked for and missed; the Countess was not among the spectators. She still reclined in the low chair in which she had already sought rest. At the first exhibi-

tion of the precious pocket-book she had raised her eyes, but the sight did not seem to interest her greatly, and after a momentary glance she had dropped them again, and had resumed her listless reclining attitude.

Some explanation seemed to be expected from Colonel Tremayne, and he did not baulk the expectation.

He spoke very calmly and quietly, and he raised his voice no higher than just sufficed to reach the Countess's chair, some four or five yards from where he stood.

"You seem," he said, "ladies and gentlemen, so much interested in these stones that perhaps you would like to know how I became their possessor. I don't as a rule care to talk about it, but I will tell you. I brought them from the country where I lived for five years. They represent the work I did there. The currency of that part of the world is diamonds and Arab horses. I always took payment in diamonds. It is a wild place, and coin is hardly a safe investment. They understand diamonds better than most people, and many of the good ones in the world find their way there. Here is a fine stone now!"

He detached from the wax in which it was half imbedded a diamond of a peculiar

rounded shape, and held it up for inspection delicately poised between his finger and thumb. It seemed to be of the shape and bigness of a robin's egg, and as the sunlight played all round on its sharp cut facets, it shot forth rays of coloured light on every side in a way that was quite dazzling. A low whisper of admiration went round among the group of bystanders.

"It is what the lapidaries call a double rose diamond; there are not many in the world, and this is one of the largest known. A Paris diamond merchant offered me ten thousand pounds for this and the sister stone. They were given me by a border chieftain for whom I fortified a hill stronghold."

The murmurs of applause among the ladies and gentlemen grew more audible.

Colonel Tremayne took from the book a double row of enormous stones, linked together by silver wires of hair-like thinness.

"These twenty large brilliants," he said, holding them up in the light, "were given to me by the Khan himself, for a service I did him. They were once, I have reason to believe, some of the finest stones in the French Regalia, and have been missing from it since the Revolution."

The guests seemed to be under a spell. Here was a man standing quietly before them, and telling them as plain facts, with an impassive manner and in calm and measured tones, things which were like the realisations of the dreams of fairyland.

Sir John was the first who broke the silence that was on them, and spoke.

"But, my dear sir, you must have put him under some inestimable obligation to have obtained such a reward."

"By no means; but they are a generous people. I had headed his troops when they took the field against an invasion of Afghans."

The pent-up admiration of the guests found vent in exclamations of applause and sympathy. Colonel Tremayne seemed wholly untouched by it, and he continued his inventory in the same cold and emotionless tone.

"Here now is a real curiosity"—he displayed a very large and perfect brilliant of the colour of grass—"a 'green diamond;' there is only one other as big in the world—it is the finest gem in the Emperor of Russia's crown—but mine has the better colour. When I drained off the water from an inland sea in the northern province, and turned the bed of

it into cornfields and olive groves, the Governor offered me my choice of this stone, or a hundred Arab horses of the pure breed of the Prophet, with bits of solid silver, jewelled saddles and bridles, and a Persian slave to each horse. I chose the stone."

The enthusiasm of the guests culminated. A contagion of excitement seemed to seize upon them, the men broke into cheers, the women clapped their hands. In their nervous excitation they did not seem to notice how perfectly unsympathetic and calm the object of all their applause continued to be. The slow smile even which had been on his lips as he spoke had died away, his glance was not even on the circle of ladies and gentlemen around him; it reached beyond them to the Countess. Still she sat there, impassive, waiting apparently, in the same attitude of indolent inattention, for the passing away of an excitement in which she herself had no part whatever.

CHAPTER VI.

PRESENTLY, when Colonel Tremayne had ceased speaking, closed the book and replaced it in his pocket, the circle broke up and formed themselves apart into small groups, to discuss the strange news and to consider the changes it had wrought in their ideas.

Lord George and his sister stayed by their cousin to congratulate him. Presently Captain Shendy joined them. He had something to say, but he seemed to feel an awkwardness about saying it. His arms and legs, which were never quite at ease when he stood on anything but a pair of stirrups, jerked more spasmodically than usual.

Colonel Tremayne gave him the opportunity he seemed to want of speaking. He came to his point bluntly without any preliminary subterfuge.

"That gun, Colonel Tremayne——"

"You still think it too straight in the stock for me?"

"Well—no! I'm not so sure that it is. I've been considering——"

"Do you know," said Colonel Tremayne, "I thought you were wrong about the straightness of that stock?" and he smiled on him pleasantly as he spoke.

Captain Shendy felt that he had got well out of a rather awkward predicament; there was not a particle of resentment or asperity in the Colonel's tone, and Captain Shendy could look upon him in future as an influential person with whom his good relations had never suffered an interruption.

Professor Dredge came up. He too felt that he had a blunder to repair, but he could use a little more art than Captain Shendy in repairing it.

"I have been struck, my dear sir," he began, "as I listened to your most interesting narration, with the evidences which it unquestionably affords of the existence of a higher civilisation among your friends the Beloochees in some bygone age. That country is, I need hardly tell you, more of a *terra incognita* to us than almost any other on the globe. Therefore your mention of the posses-

sion by its inhabitants of precious stones, of a valuable breed of horses, and of elaborate jewelled trappings for these animals, all point to some degree of culture which is at present no doubt rather the tradition of passed-away centuries than the measure of their actual civilisation. You spoke too of hill strongholds——"

"I see how he is coming to it!" thought Colonel Tremayne, but his manner expressed only the most deferential interest.

"Pray now, I would ask you, are they fortified enceintes? I apply to you as the highest possible professional authority on the subject. Are they works with regular defences —curtains, bastions, ravelins, redoubts, and glacis?"

"No," said the Colonel, with extreme gravity, "they are not scientific fortifications exactly."

"Detached erections, perhaps? Not mere earthworks?"

"No, not mere earthworks."

"Erections of masonry, probably?"

Colonel Tremayne nodded demurely, but would give no further help.

"Towers, perhaps, on isolated hill-tops?"

"Yes, round towers," said Colonel Tre-

mayne, keeping, but not finding it very easy to keep, his countenance.

"Ah!" cried the Professor, "they would no doubt be such primitive hill forts or Peel towers as we find in these Highlands of Scotland."

"I am glad to see," said Colonel Tremayne, "that you have not absolutely abandoned the connection between Western Asia and the Western Highlands?"

"By no means," said the savant, "by no manner of means."

"Pray remember," said Colonel Tremayne, "that I ventured to think that you were a little hasty in giving up that hypothesis."

Before the long-winded Professor had quite done with the subject, though not before that clear-seeing savant had obtained satisfactory evidence that the wealthy and distinguished traveller bore him no ill feeling whatever, Miss Langham had come up and addressed him.

In her capacity of pretty woman and eccentric enthusiast, the young lady felt that no beating about the bush was required in her case.

"Oh, Colonel Tremayne," she began abruptly, "I am so glad!"

Tremayne looked up at once to the sky

and affected to study the signs of the firmament.

"That cloud?" he asked, looking down again pleasantly at the young American.

"It has lifted!"

"I see it has. Do you know, I guessed it would. And after lunch we can go to see that view, can we not?"

"We can!" cried the young lady, really delighted at her easy reconquest of her former position, "and how very charming it will be."

Colonel Tremayne was left with his cousin.

"George!" he said, and there was an earnestness and even an elation in his tone, in singular contrast to the reserve and the undertone of mockery which had marked it in his talk with the others—"George, did you see the Countess, as I told them of the diamonds? Did you watch her? You were wrong about her after all, you see! Come now! admit it. She made no sign. She is not mercenary like the rest of them!"

Lord George paused before he answered gravely:

"Jim, my dear fellow, take care! That woman is no fool. She will be too much for the pair of us together, mark my words!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE morning-room at Glen Cruachan had this advantage over the other rooms, that its great size allowed guests to carry on the business or pleasure of life, undisturbed by pursuits in the same kind of other guests or other groups of guests.

On the afternoon of the day on which Sir John and his friends had lunched at Glen Albyn, and before the shooting party had come home, Lord George Vivash was engaged in writing letters for the late post in one part of the room, while Miss Langham and the wife of the great thinker were having tea in quite another, and his lordship had so taken his position that no word of their talk should interrupt the current of his thoughts and business. Only now and then, in the act of closing a letter, or reaching out for a fresh envelope, his glance would rest for a

moment on the serious countenances and clearly earnest talk of the two ladies over their tea-cups. "Dress, gossip, or scandal," guessed his lordship to himself, "one of the three it must be!" and he went on writing, without troubling himself further in the matter.

There is such a thing as being too clever, and, thank heaven! the cynics are not always in the right of it.

It so happened that these two ladies were engaged in conversation which was very far indeed from being either frivolous or malicious. Miss Langham was a lady of an inquiring mind, and she was genuinely interested in Mrs. Bent and in Mrs. Bent's opinions. Miss Langham loved to be in the van of things, and was, as a rule, very much in their van. Her talent it was to take an enthusiastic interest, though perhaps but a passing one, in each new doctrine of the scientist or the metaphysician, and to talk of it just well enough to be thought extremely clever, and never so deeply or so exhaustively as to be tiresome.

Now here, in Mrs. Bent's keeping, was a new doctrine that transcended all the new things she had ever heard of; a doctrine

which was really interesting and startling to a degree, and seemed to answer all sorts of stiff unanswerable questions, and to solve many of the very stiffest problems of life. Miss Langham was all curiosity as to the new doctrine, and that curiosity had as yet got no satisfaction out of books or journals, nor had Miss Langham met any inquirer who could tell her anything at all definite. In truth there were inquirers in plenty, but none who were as yet initiated.

Dr. Bent was the prophet of the new dispensation, but he was a prophet who would never preach. The preaching was to come, in the fulness of time, in a book which this philosopher was known to be writing; yet those who knew him best doubted whether his future book would not be to the full as profound, soul-dispiriting, and non-informing as his present silence.

Dr. Bent, however, had—happily for the comfort of an eager and inquiring world—a high-priest, in the person of his wife. Almost all that was known of Dr. Bent's opinions came from some few disconnected utterances of Mrs. Bent's. She too, except to a few favoured mortals, had a disappointing gift of reserve, and she was also excessively

vague in her utterances. Even as to the very title of the great coming book there was no certain note sounded by her.

"It will be called," she said at one time, "'The Great Mystery;'" at other times she announced it as "The Hidden Hand;" after that she was heard to say: "We have resolved upon a more suggestive and explicit title; we shall either call it 'The Veil' or else 'The Light under the Bushel.'"

Miss Langham was of an adaptable humour —indeed it was her great charm—and on no other terms could even so pretty and clever a young lady as she was have got admittance so freely into the great world. She could dress well with the women who dressed well, talk thoughtfully with the thoughtful, or knit and gossip with the knitters and gossipers of her sex. To-day she was in her profoundest psychological mood.

Yet this afternoon there had been upon her for a time an uneasy feeling that perhaps she had not done altogether wisely in throwing in her lot with the odd, little, thin-featured, elderly woman who was sitting opposite to her, her brows gathered with thoughtfulness and the corners of her mouth down-turned from excessive gravity. She was not sure but

that the Countess von Schimmerling and Madame de la Pretentaine, following the Continental and American fashion, might not at this very moment be effecting an afternoon change of raiment, to the discomfiture of all other women with pretensions to dressing rightly, and she was perchance losing the precious time in company of a lady who followed no fashion in dress known to civilised women; who arrayed herself neither fashionably, nor artistically, nor æsthetically; who dressed, neither well nor wisely, in a tight-fitting brown stuff dress, with innumerable buttons from throat to feet, looking like a man's great-coat gathered in at the waist with a belt.

Nevertheless, if she could but draw of the precious waters of exposition from the well of which Mrs. Bent was the guardian, no time, she felt, and no trouble would be wasted. She really wanted something new and startling—a doctrine to shock and to startle. Ultra-æstheticism had had its day, it would no longer draw attention, hardly even scorn nowadays. It was played out.

Miss Langham was engaged in winding Shetland wool. It suddenly struck her that in the presence of a high-priestess the occu-

pation was unbecoming in an intending neophyte. She observed that Mrs. Bent engaged her hands with no such frivolous toy; in them she held, as a warrior his sword, a very large ivory paper-cutter, symbol of the exploration by her of many a ponderous uncut folio. Miss Langham took up another paper-cutter lying beside her, and thus armed for the encounter, she began it with one of those well-phrased and fluent speeches of which English young ladies will perhaps never acquire the art.

"We have heard in America, dear Mrs. Bent, much of the important spiritual studies and researches in which your husband and yourself have been engaged in China. We Americans claim to be deeply interested in the later developments of psychology, and as the representative of a people who consider they have advanced farther than all other nations put together, not only in psychic progress but in every one of the arts which tend to man's moral elevation, be those arts in the domain of morals or of economic well-being, I think I may venture to ask to be the depositary of some at least of the opinions held by Dr. Bent and by yourself."

Mrs. Bent smiled benignly, but her answer

was hardly encouraging. She had a remarkably "short way with dissenters" from her own views—a cut-and-dryness, if such a word may be coined—a severe self-possession, and such a faculty of rounded and well-balanced phrases as made it delightful to listen to her, and left Miss Langham far behind in her own domain of speech-making.

"I am afraid I must begin by shocking you, dear Miss Langham, when I tell you that the American nation, which, with a pardonable patriotic partiality, you esteem so highly, is viewed by Dr. Bent, by myself, and by the Theosophists of Central China as being nothing but the effete and rapidly decaying remnant—regarded either from an intellectual, a moral, or even a physical standpoint—of the degenerate offshoot of one of the least important sub-races of mankind."

Miss Langham had never, in all her life before, heard anything approaching to the startling boldness of this commencement. She was staggered, and asked, almost with diffidence in the presence of so sweeping an innovator:

"And the English, pray, and the French nation, and the Germans, are they too——?"

"Oh, quite so! They all belong to the

same branch of an effete sub-race, and are running a somewhat parallel course with your American compatriots towards utter degradation and eventual annihilation. You may be interested perhaps to learn that your people will have ceased to exist as a nation in a little less than four thousand, five hundred, and fifty years."

Miss Langham breathed again when she learnt that her great nation had received a respite.

"Dr. Bent," observed the high-priestess, "could give you the exact date within about three years."

"Oh, but how could he?"

"Very easily," said Mrs. Bent; "simply by the application of a well-ascertained cyclic law. You must know that the New Wisdom is cosmical rather than individual, concerns itself rather with the lives of nations than with those of individual men, and the law I spoke of is simply one by which, given the origin, the progress, the development, and the decay of a nation, we can calculate the date of its death with the most satisfactory accuracy."

"How strange!" exclaimed Miss Langham, "and yet how simple and how obvious when you state the proposition fairly."

"Is it not? It is very simple, and the conditions of the problem are really *more* than simple; they stare one in the face. The European sub-race, with its offshoot across the Atlantic—and including, as a matter of course, the Jews, the Hindus, the Thibetans, the modern Copts, the people of Asiatic Russia; but omitting, for obvious reasons, about half the population of Crim Tartary, and three-fourths of that of the island of Crete and of the town of Buda-Pesth—unquestionably had its origin about the time of the disappearance of Atlantis, the island continent, which happened, as we know for a certainty on the conclusive authority of the Egyptian priests of Sais, exactly nine thousand and twenty-one years before the birth of Solon. Now, it is undoubted also that this race reached its highest moral and intellectual development at the time of the composition of the Rig-Vedas; it was already in rapid decadence when Pythagoras and Plato, having gained access to the sacred acataleptic and esoteric writings of the Eastern sages, converted and endeavoured to translate their occult and quite untranslatable wisdom—hitherto only imparted to the initiated—into the exoteric or

popular so-called philosophy of the Greeks, as exemplified in the writings of such popular authors as Plato and Aristotle, which writings have been the plaything and delusion of the sophist and superficial thinker for two thousand years. We have thus origin, progress, development, decay—four factors. You will cease to wonder then, dear Miss Langham, that, even allowing the fullest margin for error, we can calculate upon the final disappearance from the face of the earth of the last weakly individual remnant of the great American nation within two or three years at the very outside."

"Yes, dear Mrs. Bent, quite so; it is no doubt all as you say, but pray, if I may venture to ask, how do you arrive at these really vast conclusions? By what process of reasoning?"

"By none at all," calmly answered Mrs. Bent.

"Oh," said Miss Langham, "but where do you start from? what are the premises which lead you so far? Do you employ induction like Lord Bacon, or boldly sweep down upon your conclusions like the German Kant?"

"The New Wisdom," said Mrs. Bent, "is so unlike the old——"

"I guess that," observed Miss Langham.

"So enormous a stride in advance, that we have to beg disciples in commencing their matriculation into its mysteries to make a clean sweep of all their old-world learning, and to forget, among other encumbrances to wisdom, every one of the words you have just been using, as well as all the ideas they convey, as being either obsolete, useless, or vicious. Our wisdom has been traditionally reposited"—("'Reposited' is a good word!" thought Miss Langham)—"in the minds of the learned during countless ages, and is only orally imparted from time to time to such neophytes as are morally and intellectually fitted for initiation. All other modes of conveying wisdom are abhorrent to us. The New Wisdom was begun in intuition, it is communicated by word of mouth, and only to the few in each age who are fit to receive it and who do receive it unquestionably. Thus it is that such terms as 'syllogism,' 'logic,' 'reasoning,' 'premise,' 'deduction,' and 'conclusion,' and especially 'criticism,' we hold to be foolish words, suggestive of foolish and impertinent ideas."

"And this New Wisdom was imparted to you by the sages of Central China? How interesting!"

The high-priestess felt that to so enthusiastic a seeker after truth she could safely unbend.

"Three years ago," she began again, "my husband and I knew no more than you do now of this truly transcendental wisdom. For my own part I did not even know what Occultism meant."

"I think I know what *that* means," said Miss Langham.

Mrs. Bent turned two severe eyebrows upon her young friend, but reading nothing beyond candour and curiosity upon her face, she continued:

"Neither did I know anything of superphysical consciousness, astral humanity, or cosmical evolution. Pray, dear Miss Langham, have you any notion of what these phrases mean?"

"No, dear Mrs. Bent; have you?"

There is in the innocent eagerness of simple curiosity something which at times strangely mimics the irony of the cynic, and Mrs. Bent warily examined the countenance of her companion. Again reassured, she again proceeded, but a little more cautiously.

"A sufficient explanation of these things

will come in due time, and you will understand them, in an occult and esoteric sense, for I would by no means have you to suppose that to understand a thing, in the Western sense of that word, is at all requisite. The occult wisdom, indeed, teaches us to throw ourselves in the track of an idea long before we understand it, and initiation into our mysteries consists less in learning than in unlearning, and in avoiding certain objectionable words; among others, for instance, the word 'element.' What do you think of 'element'?"

"It seems a harmless word enough."

"It is quite an impossible word to us," said Mrs. Bent severely, "as tending to confuse Occultism with the superficialities of commonplace metaphysics. What do you think of 'principle'?"

"I have been taught, you know," said Miss Langham, rather plaintively, "to think it the best thing possible, and that we can't get on at all without it."

"Oh, we do!" said Mrs. Bent smiling. "It is a word that is absolutely abhorrent to us; but let that pass, it will seem plainer to you why when you have learned that our

doctrine says that the old Karma is passing away, that it is exhausted, and that a new Karma is beginning."

"Stay! But what is a *Karma?*"

"Ah, dear Miss Langham, I am afraid that you are still sadly exoteric!"

"Yes, but what is Karma?"

"I fear if you ask me for a scientific definition I could not give you one."

"Yes, but please explain it to me, anyhow."

"I could not. I have myself only an occult sense of it, and a sense rather of its great importance than of its having any definite signification. It is, I fancy, one of those terms, and Dr. Bent fully agrees with me, by which some very enlightened person, some esoteric sage of superlative insight, perhaps several thousand years ago, expressed some truth which he alone had grasped, or imagined he had grasped, and which he found too subtle to expound and impart even to the initiated; and now occultists use these terms reverently and symbolically, so that when we say Karma——"

"You mean Karma—nothing more or less!"

"Oh," cried Mrs. Bent with a tone of conviction, "a great deal more than less!"

Miss Langham felt that she had done enough and had enough; that she already knew a great deal of the New Wisdom, perhaps almost as much as anyone, and that in future she could talk on the subject with delightful fluency. She changed the conversation.

CHAPTER VIII.

"LET me pour you out another cup of tea, dear Mrs. Bent; it is so late, I wonder the others have not come in. At least, I wonder the men have not. I don't so much wonder at Colonel Tremayne and Lady Diana. Did you see that they two went off with their guns quite by themselves?"

"And why should they be later than other people?" asked Mrs. Bent with curiosity.

It is all very well to philosophise on the occult, but one must not the less know the ins and outs of the society one lives among.

"Oh, they are cousins, you know, and they have not met for so long." Miss Langham laughed maliciously.

"Was there anything between them at any time?"

"Oh yes, dear Mrs. Bent, did you not know? Perhaps it was when you were

among the sages of Central China. People said they were engaged to be married. Then I suppose something happened, for he went into that long exile—quite suddenly. There were all sorts of stories at the time. Somehow this Countess Schimmerling was mixed up with it all. It appears they were all on the Continent together. One never knows the real story; it would be so very interesting if one only could. Shall I shock you if I say what I believe was the real explanation? It was a case of two strings to his bow."

"Pray how?"

"Why, I mean that he was flirting with one of them, probably his cousin, and in love with the other."

"Now, how particularly shocking!"

"I was sure you would think so," said Miss Langham gaily, as if to shock her companion was to give that stern moralist and thinker a really human pleasure. "Perhaps, though, the true story may have been quite different after all."

"I really prefer to think so; but pray how do you understand 'quite different'?"

"I mean," said Miss Langham, "that he may have been flirting with the Countess and really in love with his cousin."

"I don't think," said Mrs. Bent, "that would much mend matters."

"I am afraid not. Do you know what my idea is? That the Countess knows all about it and resents it."

Mrs. Bent's researches into the intricacies of sublunary human affairs were not deep enough for her to follow Miss Langham in these subtle speculations, and the young lady reasoned it out by herself.

"It is not natural," she said, thinking aloud, "that the Countess should snub such a very charming person as Colonel Tremayne for nothing. No! you may be sure it is that —don't you think so?"

Mrs. Bent in her turn was out of her depth, and shook her head. Miss Langham perceived it, and got at once into shallower water.

"I think the Countess so lovely, don't you?"

Mrs. Bent did not assent immediately.

"Oh, don't you? You think she is too pale? Well, perhaps; but it is of such little consequence now — people are so clever. And you think her too thin? Yes, no doubt she is; but if one has such a good French dressmaker as she has, that is rather

an advantage than not, so people say; anyhow the men all admire her, and she dresses so beautifully. I am quite sure we shall see her in a fresh dress before dinner, and another at dinner."

Lord George, having finished his letters, passed the two ladies on his way to post them in the hall, and caught the sound of the word "dress" as he passed by them. "I was right!" he thought, and he left the room confirmed in his mistaken cynicism.

A moment afterwards the Countess appeared in the gallery, and Miss Langham's fears were seen to be justified. The lady had put on an exquisitely new and fashionable tea-gown.

"Dear Countess!" cried Miss Langham as the lady descended the stairs, her native grace and dignity admirably enhanced by the sheen of exquisitely tinted drapery, and the undulation of softly flowing skirt and train—"dear Countess, you are so late for tea, but let me pour you out a cup now!"—in lower tone, and for the new-comer's ear only, and with hands ecstatically clasped, she added: "How lovely!"

Miss Langham was right. The Countess Schimmerling was not only dressed to per-

fection, but she was a very lovely woman, tall, slim, and possessing in her slightest gesture and movement that ease, grace, and dignity combined which is not easily attained by a woman younger than twenty-eight or thirty years. Her critics contended that all was art in her; the modulations of a voice that fell on the ear like music, her gliding walk, her standing up, her sitting down—all these things it was said were too perfectly graceful to be perfectly natural. The light poise of her head, and every becoming gesture, and every easy, graceful attitude they envied indeed, but they disparaged, as coming not from nature but of long and artful study. Perhaps they were right. If it was natural it was very beautiful; and if it was not natural, it was still very beautiful, and a thing apparently—to judge from its rarity—not very easy to accomplish even by art.

Her face was a little too pale perhaps, rather to the discomfiture of some ill-natured critics, and a little too thin also, and in repose rather too sad and serious; her hair was neither golden nor light auburn, but between the two; a colour of hair which goes often, as it went with her, with arched and

well-marked eyebrows. Altogether, and taking the bad and good together, a woman such as there are few to be seen.

The wife of the thinker had never before felt at such a disadvantage with anyone. She could not but perceive that the Countess stood, as a woman, temporarily at least, at a height at which Theosophism and the wisdom of past æons, as concentrated in her own person, dwindled almost to nothing at all. Miss Langham herself, with all her versatility and energy, felt lessened in her dignity and self-importance. She was of far too kindly a nature to feel very vindictively envious, but it was hardly human to contemplate all the Countess's advantages quite dispassionately.

Miss Langham could speak excellent book-English, as has been seen; it was only in moments of deep emotion that she forgot to let her speech be classical. She forgot her classicism in the words she now addressed to herself in her self-reproach and vexation: "To think that I have been fooling around with this stupid Bent woman when I might have been putting on a new frock!"

The Countess took Miss Langham's proffered cup of tea with a sweet smile of acknowledgment and sank, in her accus-

tomed graceful, gliding way, into the most comfortable chair in the room. One quick glance she made round the great hall and into the recesses under the overhanging gallery.

"No," said Miss Langham, answering the look with her usual quick apprehension, "no one, but ourselves and Lord George, is home yet."

The three ladies drank their tea in comparative silence, and presently when they did speak, it was Miss Langham who adventured herself in her raciest and least classical manner into a subject. It was one of considerable interest to her.

"I think I never remember anything quite so strange as that affair of Colonel Tremayne's diamonds. Only think, Countess," she cried with a laugh, "they were quite pitying the young man, and then he to turn the tables upon us all as he did. Do tell now!"

The Countess, thus pressed into the subject, answered in a nonchalant voice and manner: "Yes, he has certainly risen immensely in our estimation."

"Certainly he has so, Countess. He's what I call a downright smart fellow; and," she added, "very interesting at that!"

"Yes, very," said the Countess in the same indifferent tone.

Miss Langham was piqued at her want of interest, and she said knowingly:

"Leastways, I take it Lady Diana finds him so."

"Lady Diana?" asked the Countess quickly, not without some trace of anxiety in her voice.

"Ye—es," said the young lady in her most drawling tone, "I guess that's quite an old story now. They were together, I noticed, all the afternoon, gunning. That does seem a strange thing now, ladies gunning. Now how does that strike you, Mrs. Bent, as a Europ̀ean institution? Not but what, as tending to the eventual equality of the sexes, lady gunnists if not frivolous, might——"

"Shooting together, did you say, Miss Langham?" asked the Countess von Schimmerling.

"No, ma'am, not shooting, on'y gunning. I did not hear much shooting in their part of the moor. No, ma'am, I concluded they were otherwise employed. That's so, I think!"

No one offered a remark in answer to the young lady's insinuation. The silence was

presently broken by the distant sound of two shots.

"I think," hazarded Mrs. Bent, "they have come back."

Miss Langham rose and glanced through the panes of the latticed bow-window.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, "here they come, the Colonel and Lady Diana. Not many birds, I reckon! Shall we ask them and see what they say? Do let's! Will you, Countess? No! Will you, Mrs. Bent? No! Then I will!"

The two cousins entered; Lady Diana with heightened colour, her fair hair blown across her face, and in the highest spirits—a charming woman, who seldom in her life could have looked so bright, so pretty, and so fascinating as at this very moment, animated as she was with the flush of perfect health, and brightened by her look of absolute contentment with herself and with the world. Her figure, just inclining a little to fulness, was admirably set off by the green and gray cloth dress trimly girt at the waist, and short-skirted enough to show how delicate were her feet and ankles, though they were encased in clumsy, laced Blucher boots, thick-soled and well-furnished with nails.

"Oh!" she cried, "we have had such fun!"

"How many brace?" asked Miss Langham dryly.

"Of grouse? Oh, I don't know: how many, Jim?"

"Did we get any?" said Colonel Tremayne laughing.

"Yes, we got two. Did they not pick up those two you killed right and left just now? Though," she said laughing, "I think that's about all the shooting we did; but oh! such a delightful walk, and the air so fresh, and the heather so lovely, and the sunset! —oh, we left the grouse alone, didn't we, Jim?"

"By-the-bye," said the Colonel, taking his cousin's light gun in his hands and unlocking the stock, "let me take out your cartridges. The barrels are quite bright," he said looking through them, "not a single shot!"—Miss Langham cast a significant glance at the Countess—"We mustn't tell Sir John, must we, how we failed in our duty? Have the others come back, Miss Langham?"

"Only the General and the Professor. They would not join the guns, and went off for a walk together. They didn't shoot."

General Stone was descending the stairs as his name was mentioned. He struck cheerily into the conversation as was his wont.

"No, indeed! Our shooting days are over. The Professor's game is science now, and mine—well, ha! ha! I should be puzzled to say what mine is—an old *moustache grise* like me. What object in life can he have but his snuff-box?"—suiting the action to the word, he took out his box, gracefully tapped it and took a pinch—"and his game of whist, his game of whist!"

There was a rather taking affectation about the General's ways and talk. He was a favourite everywhere.

Miss Langham laughed incredulously.

"And the grouse, and the fine bracing air of the moors," she asked, "and the lovely scenery—what do you think of all that?"

"I think very much of them; but we old gentlemen, my dear young lady, take our enjoyments in an old-gentleman way of our own, ha! ha! As for the grouse, we like them nicely roasted, with fried bread-crumbs and bread-sauce, and your fine moorland air serves to give us an appetite to eat them with!"

"And the scenery?"

"Oh, we look at it sometimes while we are pottering about for our constitutional; but between ourselves, we like it better when we can admire it comfortably inside a gold frame, and hung on the walls of a cosy drawing-room."

"Now, General!" exclaimed the young lady, "I'm afraid you're a terrible fraud, as we say at home. Didn't we watch you and the Professor, through our glasses, climbing Ben Cruachan like two boys of fifteen, and stopping every now and then to catch a sight of the view as you went up? Oh, you're a fraud! yes, you are!"

"Ha! ha! young lady, stopping to admire the views! No, no, you don't find us old fogies sentimentalising over scenery, stopping to catch sight of views; we were stopping to catch our old breaths again, that's what we were about! But don't tell the Professor I betrayed him. He is ten years younger than I am. Poor young fellow!"

"Well now," said Miss Langham very positively, "you're taking me in all the time —'roping' me in, as we'd say, only you'll call that Yankee. I know one thing you care for, General, I do! Yes, I do!" She

looked towards the Countess and nodded knowingly.

The old man dropped his bantering tone, and for a moment there passed over the worldly, mocking face a look of real human emotion.

"Oh, you have guessed that, young lady? Well, you're right—you're right."

"She is so very beautiful, oh! and so clever," said Miss Langham, with ready sympathy.

"Beautiful and clever; yes, I suppose that's all the world sees. Ah!" said the old man, almost seeming to forget the presence of his companion, "a heart of gold! Ay, ay, a heart of gold!"

The talk dropped between them. Miss Langham pondered, and looked curiously at the Countess. "Can that affected, artificial, made-up woman," she asked herself, "really be what the old gentleman fancies? Has she taken him in as she tries to with us all, or is he the humbug, and is it only one more of the deceptions of this sophisticated old country."

So pondered and wondered the young lady, one with her wits all about her, and not easily to be deluded by the shams and counterfeits of a too perfidious world.

She turned to watch the Countess's proceedings. The General also was looking at her curiously; and Mrs. Bent, too, had her interest aroused in what was taking place. There was but little to observe, and that little passed quickly, while they all in silence watched the two actors in it.

Colonel Tremayne had approached the Countess's chair. He had put off the easy cheerful manner he had employed with his cousin, and his tone had become ceremonious.

"You came home early, Countess?"

The Countess von Schimmerling had an open book on her lap. She was not reading it, but was turning it over listlessly, looking in an abstracted way at the illustrations. She raised her eyes for a second only, and answered with the monosyllable "Yes," but vouchsafed no further explanation.

There was a pause between the two, and he began again, in the same measured and deferential tone:

"You like the Highlands, the moors, the mountain scenery?"

This time she but half looked up from her book as she answered in a tone of the greatest indifference: "Oh, yes!"

He made another attempt.

"I heard of you at Bendore's — Lord Bendore's. It is a pretty place, is it not?"

"Very," she answered.

"And the weather—that is always such an important point in Scotland—was it—a —fine, when you were there?"

"Yes, it was fine."

Certainly it cannot be claimed for these questionings of Colonel Tremayne's that they were pregnant with wit or indeed were in any manner inspiriting, but they might serve as starting points for better talk, and it was but too clear to Colonel Tremayne himself as well as the audience of what was passing, that any more genial conversation was not desired by the lady to whom they were addressed. Colonel Tremayne made one or two more attempts which were alike ineffectual, and for the second time in the day he withdrew from the encounter. Presently he left the room.

"I wonder at his patience with her!" thought Miss Langham, outraged at such snubbing of so very deserving a personage.

Mrs. Bent considered the Countess to be an exceedingly ill-bred person, who gave herself unpardonable airs.

Lady Diana's reflections were more complex.

Miss Langham presently said, in a tone to reach no further than the two ladies: "There seems to be something between those two good people. I wonder what! Can you guess, Lady Diana?"

Lady Diana did not answer.

"She wants a good setting down," said Mrs. Bent, who was herself brought up strictly in a family where no inconsistencies of temper or behaviour were countenanced.

"Do you know, I should guess——" began Miss Langham.

"Do you know it is getting very late?" exclaimed Lady Diana, interrupting her, and taking out her watch she moved towards the stairs.

One glance at the clock and another at the exquisite tea-gown of the Countess von Schimmerling determined the movements of the two ladies. They followed Lady Diana Follett. The Countess and her father were left together.

CHAPTER IX.

THE General glanced round the great room and up to the galleries, to make sure against interruption. He came near to the small table at which his daughter sat; the open book was still on her lap, but her eyes no longer rested upon its pages. She seemed at his approach to rouse herself from a deep reverie. She looked up and smiled on the old man.

"Nancy, you seem offended with your friend Tremayne. Not very cordial, eh?"

"Colonel Tremayne is hardly a friend of mine," she said coldly.

"Come, come, my dear! A lovers' quarrel —make it up, my girl, make it up!" He paused, surprised a little at the inexorable look in his daughter's face. "Why, Nancy, I used to think you liked the fellow! Come, I know you did once!"

"Father!" she said, with a tone of reproach.

"Well, well, women are a puzzle! I suppose they always will be. I didn't mean to offend you."

"Dear father," she said, looking up and taking his hand in hers, "let us leave this old story alone; will you, to please me? I know you will."

"Ay, my girl, but if I see you are doing an unwise thing I must stop you, or try to. Look here, it's a very simple thing, is it not? Surely a woman's father may speak out and not offend her."

There was a pained look on her face; he saw it clearly enough, but he thought he would persevere.

"Nancy, you cared for Colonel Tremayne once, and he for you; you gave him up because he was too poor to marry you."

She made an emphatic sign of denial, but did not speak.

"Well, now you are free and he rich—a millionaire even."

"I guess," she spoke in a low, determined tone, "what you are going to say. It is useless to say it."

"Nonsense, dear! Come now, there should

be no sentimental rubbish about a woman who has passed through the trials of life and knows them, who is a true woman of the world."

The Countess shook her head, as if in denial that she was anything but a woman of common, unhardened nerves, average feelings, and ordinary womanish sensibilities.

"Well, my dear, if you are not you ought to be by now, and——" He looked at her, and seemed suddenly struck with the conviction of how very much she was what he had alleged her to be, and with something of a worldling's admiration of so finished a specimen of another worldling he exclaimed: "And by Jove! Nancy, you know you are too! Why, my little Nancy is a finished *grande dame* if ever there was one, and she'd have ruffled it at Versailles or St. Germain with any Court marquise of the old *régime*."

She smiled at her father's warmth, but shook her head.

"My dear, a woman who has a part to play in the world must not be wise only, she must be worldly-wise too; if fortune and happiness come near her, she must not frighten them away by a foolish pride or a mistaken vanity. Lionel Tremayne parted from you five years

ago, because of his poverty. Surely, there is nothing wounding to your pride in that!"

"Oh, father!" cried his daughter with sudden vehemence, "you know it did not happen so!"

"Eh! no? I thought it was something like that. Well, yes, perhaps it was a little more than that. You were a good girl; I had to ask you to give up Colonel Tremayne, and you did."

"You know, father, why it was that I gave him up; it was because Colonel Tremayne left me—abandoned me. He found a woman he liked better than me, and he threw me over!"

With all General Stone's love for his only child, the injured voice in which she spoke, the serious tragedy look in her face, went very near to move him to a cynical mockery; for the General's own buffetings with the world not much impairing his natural gaiety, had left him a little callous to mere wounds to the emotions. The material evils of the world were in his eyes so many and so grievous that he had no pity to spare for merely sentimental grievances. They moved him, as a rule, to ridicule, not to sympathy. Nevertheless, he kept his countenance as well as he could.

"Found a woman he liked better, eh? The deuce he did! Pray, my dear, who told you that?"

His daughter's tone of deep reproach checked any inclination in him to levity.

"*You* did, father! Can I ever forget it?"

"Why, it was five years ago! God bless my soul! Nancy, what an astonishing memory you have. So *I* told you, did I?"

"Yes; you told me how he and Lady Diana——"

"Lady Diana Follett! My dear, are you really quite sure I said Lady Diana?"

"Oh, how can you ask?"

"Well, the thing has quite slipped my memory."

"Slipped your memory! Dear father, don't you remember when he went away so suddenly, and I said it must be for some reason; that his not writing must have some sufficient cause; that I would not judge him, that I could trust him, that I would wait—then—you told me of Lady Diana."

"Ah yes! now I recollect. To be sure I did. I told you about Lady Diana. I remember all about it now. My dear, don't be shocked if I say—well, it was—shall we call it—a pious fraud? it was to influence you for

your own good, to decide you to give up Colonel Tremayne, a poor man then, who could never have made my little girl happy."

"Oh, but it was true about Lady Diana."

"True! Not a bit of it! A pure invention."

"Father!"

There was a look on his daughter's face that caught his attention. She half rose from her seat with folded hands in the eagerness of her questioning, her face turned as pale as water, and the blood left her parted lips.

"It was *not* true?" She seemed to catch at the admission with a strange eagerness, but he mistook her emotion for reproach.

"Eh? I mean, of course, that I know now that it is not true; but you see, dear, I had to let you think so—to get you to believe it. You forgive your father, Nancy? It was so important just then. The fact is—you must not be vexed, Nancy, if I tell you that—that—well! I thought Lord George Vivash liked you. I never ventured to mention the matter to you, as it came to nothing, but I was sure almost he had a fancy for you, and it would have been such an excellent thing for you—for us all. It seems, however, I was wrong all round. My dear, you don't blame your old father, do you?"

His daughter was not so shocked or so surprised as might have been expected at her father's confession of duplicity, and his unauthorised interference with her affairs. Only a slight pained contraction passed across her brow at the mention of Lord George's name. She seemed wholly occupied and engrossed with one thought, and the eager, expectant look on her face a minute before gave place to a pained and anxious one.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "but it is true that Colonel Tremayne always liked Lady Diana Follett, likes her now! Oh, father, you must not try to blind me to that!"

"Tut, tut, tut! what can Jim Tremayne, a man of sense as he is, care for a shallow, rattle-tongued woman like Lady Di? Nonsense, my dear!"

She shook her head sadly: "It is no nonsense."

"But where are your eyes, girl? I am sure he never takes his off you."

"And can I not use mine too? He has been with her all day."

"He would have been with you if you had not snubbed him."

"Oh, do not mislead me!" she cried almost

piteously; "did I not see him with her a moment ago? Could I possibly mistake?"

"Nancy, you are talking nonsense. It seems to me that you really accepted my little fiction of five years ago, and have let it weigh with you; nothing else could prevent your seeing now where the truth lies. They are cousins. Oh, I do not say there is not, or was not, a mild flirtation; but what of that?"

"Don't, father!"

"Really, really, my dear Nancy, you astonish me exceedingly. You, who have known the world, to be shocked at such a trifle! It seems incredible."

There was such a discordance between the levity of the father and the earnestness, momentary perhaps only, of the daughter—but at any rate quite at variance with what he imagined to be her true character—as seemed quite unaccountable to General Stone. It was very strange to him that she should be so hard to convince of a plain fact, so shocked by a mere trifle; and he was really disappointed to find her so almost childishly unsophisticated.

"It comes," he said, "I suppose, of your having really been taken in with my little

innocent deception in those Baden days. To be sure, you were little more than a baby then in experience, and I suppose the impression has stuck to you. Very strange," he added, moralising on the phenomenon.

"Surely, father, I could not but believe you; you told me so seriously."

"You really astonish me, Nancy," he said, roused almost to a feeling of impatience. "Here have I been positively holding you up to myself as a woman of the world, and now you show yourself little better than a school-girl! Why, surely you gave the man up of your own free will; you saw the folly of persevering. My little fiction surely was but a peg to you to hang your refusal on—a salve to your conscience!"

She shook her head. "How little you know me!"

"Why, child, life for all of us is full of such innocent frauds as this; they serve"—and he tried to carry off the doubtful sentiment with a certain rhetorical grandiloquence—"they serve to reconcile our principles with our interests." He laughed at her look of negation. "Well, they do, say what you will. Hang it, Nancy! is it your education I have to take in hand again? Look here, child, the

game of life is like a great game of chess. The pieces are the things of this world—fortune, estates, appointments, honours, and so forth——"

"And happiness?" she asked, with a doubtful smile, as if her father's philosophy was neither very new nor very sound in her eyes.

"A pure abstraction, dear, and it is the end, not the means; win the game, and you win that." He went on with his moralising: "The other good things of the world are the queens, the castles, and the bishops; these are what we have to make the moves of life with, and, if we are lucky, win the game. But in life, just as in chess, there are ever so many little pieces that, when you begin to play, you give up—you throw away. In chess there are the smaller pieces—the pawns—that you don't care much to stick too fast to; in the game of life, prejudices, opinions, convictions even, and of course sometimes, when one is—ha, ha!—very young—love. Your caring for Colonel Tremayne, that of course was a pawn; and, as you were playing a serious game—as a woman of the world, not a schoolgirl—you gave him up, you threw the pawn away."

"No!" said Nancy simply, but with great decision.

"'No?' Oh, but I say you did; you threw him over at the beginning of the game, and now see what has happened"—he laughed at his own fancy—"that same insignificant piece has got on a back row (like a counter at draughts), and has ten times its old value. What do you do, eh? Why you take him—you use him."

"Never!" cried Nancy.

The old gentleman was quite pleased with his fancy and his fluency. They so carried him away that he altogether overlooked his daughter's recalcitration, and quite recovered his ordinary good-humour.

"What!" he said laughing, "the tragedy vein? All nonsense, dear, take my word for it. Oh, the difference between you is not serious, I daresay. Upon my word, a very pretty lovers' quarrel! It will all come right in the end, depend upon it!"

"Ah, father!" she said, in an accent and with a look so beseeching that it went to his heart, "I have been deceived so often! No doubt it was for the best; I know you meant it kindly, but this time tell me everything, really the truth. Is this true, that he——

Oh, make me believe it! I so long to, but I dare not!"

"True, my dear! On my word and honour it is true. What can I say more than that?"

A feeling something like remorse held him for a moment, and he was greatly relieved to see a look of trust come back to his daughter's face. He was seeking for further evidence and better arguments to satisfy her than his bare assurance, and there was a silence between them.

It was broken by an approaching footstep. General Stone glanced through the latticed panes of the bow-window. He laughed at what met his eyes, forgetting again the momentary stinging of his conscience.

"Ha!" he cried, "this is good luck! Here comes Jim Tremayne himself in the very nick of time. I shall not say another word more—no, no! I'll leave it to you to make it up between you. I know he's coming to try to get into your good graces again."

The old gentleman recovered all his accustomed spirits. He could see that his diplomacy had told on his daughter's convictions, and he was happy in having brought about what he believed was for her happiness. He rose to go.

"Good-bye, dear; a lovers' quarrel—eh? *amantium iræ*, as we used to say at Eton; and you shall do the *amoris redintegratio*, the renewing of your love, all by yourselves!"

But the old ignore or forget the many turns and twists in that tortuous path, of whose windings they think they show their perfect knowledge when they have quoted some musty maxim or some futile tag of verse.

CHAPTER X.

TREMAYNE had no such intention as General Stone had ascribed to him. He had been repelled twice in his advances, and he was not going to risk a third discomfiture. Though pride had little to do with his prudence, he felt that a third attempt would come too near to being subservience. Moreover, the time had arrived, he considered, to pursue another course, and he had little difficulty in selecting a line of operations, seeing that he, in common with most men, had certain cut and dried maxims about women's ways in the abstract, as women too appear to have about men's; and when either sex is at its wits' end for a line of conduct, it applies one of these rules, and generally suffers the penalty of its stupidity.

There are however, even among general axioms, some which are not injudicious; and

fortunately Colonel Tremayne in his dilemma chose one of these for his guidance; an axiom which might, no doubt, be quoted by the learned in several dead languages, and which is to the effect that wise men should leave a woman to herself when they cannot make her out. He could not make out the Countess von Schimmerling's treatment of him, and he left her to herself.

It was a policy of masterly inaction. Never was he so astonished and pleased in his life as at the sudden and immediate success with which this policy seemed to be followed. He entered the room, and was proposing to himself to pass through it, without the smallest expectation of finding the lady of his thoughts in it and alone.

There she was, however, still seated in the low chair he had left her in an hour before, and she still had on her knees the open book that she had been trifling with, not reading. He saw that it would not do to speak to her, yet he was by no means inclined to go away and leave her to herself; nevertheless, it was clear that if he came within easy talking distance in the vast room, he must address her, or seem to be offended, or seem to be boorish.

Fortunately the size and arrangement of the

apartment allowed a middle course. Turning at the doorway he ascended the stairs, and presently he was in the gallery, and looking into the book-shelves there as if for a book. He took out one at random, sat down in one of the red-curtained recesses designed especially for idle readers, and opened his book. He did not read, but, making as if he read, he managed that his eyes should be lifted about two inches above the upper edge of the page, and take in a full bird's-eye view beneath him the reclining figure of the Countess von Schimmerling. What was his astonishment to discover that while his eyes were travelling discreetly downwards, hers were travelling upwards with no attempt at discretion at all. What was more surprising was, that the cold and repellent expression she had worn had disappeared, and something approaching a smile had taken its place.

"Wonderful," naturally thought Colonel Tremayne, "is the inconsistency of women! And," he mentally added, also naturally, "how very pleasant it can be!"

The Countess, after looking and smiling, could hardly do less than speak.

"You look," she said, "very happy up there!"

"I am," he said, thinking less of his actual situation than of the sudden change in the condition of things, "very!"

Yet, being a soldier and acquainted with the stratagems of war, he thought well to hold parley with his late enemy from his present strong position before capitulating altogether.

"Are you reading a very interesting book?"

"No," she said, "are you?"

"I am not reading at all," and he got up and began his descent of the stairs. Still hardly believing in his change of fortune, he crossed the room and sat down in the vacant chair in front of her.

There was so much in the past of these two persons, each had been so much and yet so little to the other for so many long and weary years, and each felt that there existed between them so many causes for misunderstanding and heartburning, that there was an unwillingness on both sides to continue speaking on the same trifling matters that had brought them together. Nor was there any awkwardness in the silence that fell between them, so fully engaged were they in filling that silence now with kind memories, now with new hopes,

now with tormenting thoughts and doubts and misgivings.

It was a strange interview, for they sat there each for a short space silently gazing full and earnestly upon the other, each trying to read in the other's face all the secret causes of the estrangement that had come between them, and the hidden history of the past-away term in each of their lives.

She saw very little change in him; the expression of his face was a little firmer, as of one who had passed through many strange vicissitudes of danger and of death; it was bronzed by the burning Indian sun and winds; otherwise he was as he used to be—the same look on the face; the gray eyes, the set mouth, were quite unchanged; the same face that had touched and troubled and stirred her as no other face ever had or ever could.

The change that he saw in her was far greater; she had lost some of the bloom and the gaiety and the fulness of her youth, but she had gained very many things in their place. She had attained to a beauty of a far higher type than her girlhood had ever given promise of, for her cheek was thinner, her eyes seemed larger and to have a profounder meaning in them, and her features

were more delicate; the high colour of youth was no longer on her face, but a transparent tint between paleness and colour that was infinitely rarer and more attractive.

So great was the alteration from the prettiness and unthinking carelessness of girlhood to the grace and the stronger, deeper charm and fascination of her womanhood, that her former lover felt that the Nancy Stone he had known and loved had gone away from him for ever. As in magical histories, her place had been taken by a phantasm of herself, transformed into a being more ethereal, and with a grace and charm far more enthralling than ever, and with an influence over him far stronger than before; but wanting, as he guessed, in that soul of sympathy and love for him, which had in the past-away time been a bond of union between them. And that disquieted him. How could a being so altered from her he had known, so perfected into what she was now, ever come to regard him again as she had been used to regard him? Was not this the sufficient interpretation of her capriciousness—a woman's privilege always—without reasonable cause to be assigned or even asked for?

This was how he began to see the thing;

but presently he was going to take a more cynical view.

Colonel Tremayne was of far too large a nature to condescend to make her inconsistency to him a subject of complaint, or for plaintive question, or any sort of querulous argument with her. He was contented to enjoy her more genial mood on any terms. He was contented to take delight in the charm of her society; but in doing so there was a good deal more than a feeling of disquietude. There was apprehension too, and something like suspicion and mistrust.

As yet it was a new and strange woman by whose influence he found himself being drawn, not the Nancy Stone of whose honesty and simple candour he had been as sure as of a child's. This ideal of her he had carried in his memory, not impairing it much by what had seemed very startling revelations of her nature to him; her rejection of his poverty, her double-dealing with him, and her degradation of herself by an unworthy marriage. All these things the romance of his great love had explained away or condoned, and in his thought the image of the Nancy Stone he had known, sweet, true, and candid, had reigned supreme. That image and the old

ideal vanished immediately when he saw how transformed she had become in looks, in mind, and in manners. A man may be a lover, and reason wildly on abstract points, but some material facts have to every sane man a force that is not to be resisted; and they carry a process of inexorable logic in their train.

He saw it all now at a glance; the capriciousness which had always been latent and had once caused her to play fast and loose with her love, had now developed and was become habitual with her, was turned to a trick of social fence and another charm.

She was, he could see, case-hardened by contact with a hypocritical world, and superficially she had become smooth, easy, brilliant, fluent—another charm, no doubt, but the girlish hesitations and self-misgivings which had so taken him in his old love had gone. Lord George's voice had bidden him beware of the company he found her in, had warned him to be on his guard; and he recalled in fancy the life she had been living as the wife of a foreigner of a doubtful character and the associate of a proved scoundrel; a life of vicissitudes, of nameless shifts, and of unknown temptations.

Tremayne was a man not so young in

years or so wanting in experience as not to have learnt that there are women with whom any communication whatever is perilous, and he asked himself whether this fair creature before him was not of the company of the sirens of the world. He could not be sure, but he told himself that he must be on his guard. Let her too be on hers. It would be no unequal match between her and any man, the shrewdest and worldliest.

He knew he was at this advantage with her, that with this newly found and most fascinating woman were associated memories of one whom he had once loved from his soul, and on whose account he had suffered so much. He might tell himself that the old image had faded, and the old spell been broken, and that there was nothing now for him but the new fascination to take such prudent pleasures in as he might; yet all the time he was not so sure that he could entirely disentangle the old love from the new admiration. He was going, however, to try.

"I thought," said he, laughing a little, "I really thought, Countess, that we were never even to be on speaking terms again!"

"It looked a little like it," she answered as lightly.

She could not understand why it was that he had put off entirely the tone of deference he had used with her just now.

"I should have been sorry for that," he said, "we were such friends once."

She looked grave for a moment, and her voice had another, a lower and a softer tone, as she answered:

"Yes, indeed we were."

"The siren's voice!" thought Colonel Tremayne; "the rocks are not far ahead, and I must steer carefully. What a time ago it is!" he said, "I wonder you even recollect it; you have led such a full and pleasant life since."

"And you?"

"Oh, my life has been full enough, but not so pleasant as to interfere much with my memory."

"You were earning diamonds; that, from a woman's point of view, is always pleasant."

"And you too. Herr von Bauer told me just now that the Schimmerling diamonds are magnificent."

A pained look passed over the Countess's face. Colonel Tremayne felt that he had said a cruel and an ungenerous thing, but thought it but just that a woman so heartless

and capricious should not escape quite scathless from the man she had injured. He even proceeded to turn the arrow he had shot, in the wound.

"That perhaps," he said laughing, "is why you were so indifferent when I showed you mine just now."

Tremayne was surprised to find that a woman of the Countess's quick turn of speech should have no answer ready. She hesitated for a moment, as if to make him one, but ended by saying nothing and the smile died on her lips.

It is not a pleasant thing for a man to find when he means to give but a light touch that he has inflicted a wound—to find that one whom we took for a master of fence has let himself be broken in upon by the first lunge. Much worse if it is a woman we have wounded.

This was Tremayne's feeling. He had heard much at the house where he had been staying of the Countess von Schimmerling's skill in the give and take of talk; he had himself that day at the lunch on the moor, as he listened to her, been able to corroborate this opinion about her, and had seen how keen was her wit and how shrewd her defence, and he had never supposed that such a chance

stroke as he had made would find a fault in her armour. He felt rueful, for it had always been his way to treat women chivalrously and with a deference that has become a little old-fashioned in these days.

He cast about for some form of apology and retractation, but he made none, for his shrewdness suddenly interposed a suggestion which checked his repentance. What if this confusion and weakness were nothing but a pretence and a woman's guile?

This prudent interpretation of the Countess's manœuvre was, however, not supported by the lady's next very downright remark.

"Herr von Bauer knows less than nothing about the matter. I possess only a few very small diamonds."

He had good reason to be taken aback. "Strange that being your brother-in-law he should not have known!"

She was fated that day to say things he did not expect.

"He is not my brother-in-law."

"Indeed! You tell me that? It happens that I know it already, but as he passes as such, and calls himself so, I called him what the world does."

She looked very searchingly upon him.

"Pray, Colonel Tremayne, how do you happen to be aware of what I am sure is not generally known?"

After a pause, in which he too looked her full in the face, he answered the question as seriously as she had asked it.

"Coming home, I travelled through the Continent, and stayed some time in Germany. I passed a few days in Baden, where you and I parted five years ago: in Munich, where you have lived since, I stayed a week; in Dresden, where you had been, and also in Vienna, where I heard you had spent some time. It happened that I had to stay some days in each of those towns."

He spoke slowly, and his eyes were fixed upon her face, as if he would not be sorry if she gathered some concealed meaning which he did not care to express more openly.

"Thus it was," he went on, "that I *happened*"—he dwelt on this word—"to hear something about Herr von Bauer, something of General Stone, and also something of you."

Perhaps she *did* gather something of the meaning he wished her to take in, but if so, the doing so was not agreeable to her, for she was uneasy under his gaze, and laughed, as if to put aside his seriousness.

"Strange, to use your own word," she said, now again rather mockingly, "that after so long an absence from your friends you should have so lingered on your way back to them!"

"You forget the picture galleries!" he said, in her own lighter tone.

"Yes, I forgot the picture galleries, particularly the one in Baden. What is the chief master there?"

"Baden, I admit, has no art attractions."

"Pray what attraction had it for you?" she said, pressing him for an answer.

He was not going to let her turn the tables upon him in this light-hearted way. He laughed.

"Really, Countess, I don't wonder you ask. I know one gains a great deal by living in the world, but one loses some things, and among them are one's illusions."

"Oh," cried Nancy with conviction, "one can lose them without going very far into the world, but, granting I have lost mine, what then? would not having lost them help me to understand why you went to Baden?"

There was a mock gravity in his face as he answered her, and though his face was serious there was laughter in his eyes.

"Losing your own illusions, you could perhaps not understand their existence in another person."

"Hardly, perhaps; but let us assume them, and then?"

"What should you say of a retired Colonel of Engineers in a sentimental reverie by moonlight under the plane trees of Baden?"

Now if there is a thing calculated to sadden a woman and to irritate her and to exasperate her beyond measure, it is for a man who has once cared for her to let her see he has reached that calm and critical mood when he can contemplate his past love from that slightly comic point of view which so often appertains to that interesting passion.

Even this outrage, however, the Countess supported without a sign of ill-humour, and Colonel Tremayne, who was innocent of any intentional offence beyond intentional levity in her own kind, never knew what magnanimity she had exhibited.

One of two things only could have kept her patient, curiosity, or the feeling that her old lover had the right to treat her somewhat harshly. Which was it of the two? Colonel Tremayne, intent only on his own train of thoughts and conclusions, was not aware that

there were alternatives for him to choose between.

"You have not told me what took you to Baden?" she went on to ask with odd persistence.

"I have asked you to guess," he said, playing a little with her curiosity.

Angry as she might be, and should have been, she was somehow not angry. He had laughed at his old love for her, but there was no ring of true mockery about his laughter; she tried to put herself in his place, and to place a construction upon his banter in accordance with her desires. But such attempts as hers are not often achieved in a world where men and women are for ever in different planes of thought and feeling and being, and when consequently the shrewdest of either sex must mostly fail to get any certain revelation of the latent nature of the other.

"Tell me!" she said at last, quite desperately, and in a tone that was almost a caress.

But he could not as yet trust her at all with any truth. He could not speak out, and he put off her urgency with an excuse which was true to the letter but not in the spirit:

"Well," he said, apparently yielding the

point, "I had expected to find my cousins there, Lord George and Lady Diana."

"Lady Diana!" she cried. He saw the momentary tightening of her face, and then its relaxation into a pained and artificial smile. He thought her surprise and sudden motion strange, but being unable to assign any cause for it whatever, he passed her emotion by and forgot it.

He began to think presently, as there fell a pause between them, that he had said a number of unnecessarily disagreeable things, that he had been needlessly distrustful towards her; and he resolved to turn over a new leaf in his relations with her and be wholly pleasant.

Nancy, in fact, was beginning to exercise some of the old spell over him. It was delightful to sit there and watch her face, to feel her eyes upon him, to hear her voice again; there was now an exquisite softness in it, a tone that made music with slumbering memories of his past life. He was surprised himself to find how strong these memories were, how they mastered him. The truth came upon him suddenly as his eyes were on the sweet face before him. He had loved this woman once: in spite of all that had

gone by, he loved her still. Life with her might bring its bitterness, but life in which she had no part at all was a bitterness worse than death. Men do not argue with themselves in such emergencies. They do not stop to set forth the for and the against; they feel, they know, and they act. As he sat there, he resolved that this woman must be his wife, and if there was force of will and energy in him, she *should* be his wife.

So he resolved, and again he would woo her.

CHAPTER XI.

IT has been alleged latterly by advanced thinkers that in a remodelled world, wherein, so soon as some great seer-woman, gifted beyond her sisters with insight into the wants and aspirations of her sex, shall have preached and made clear and acceptable to the sons of men the great and hitherto unguessed feminine evangel, men and women shall thereafter walk abreast with equal foot, rejoicing that the great mystery of woman's nature—fruitful cause of endless mystifications, trouble, and lamentation—is solved and has for ever ceased to be.

No doubt when this supreme consummation arrives the world will be a less careworn world than it is now, but probably too it will be a duller world, and the great seer-woman will have accomplished for us the ill service that has already been done to mankind by

those sages who have unpeopled for ever the woods, the waters, and the earth of the tribes of fauns, of nymphs, of fairies, of genii, and of gnomes.

In the meantime the great evangel has not been published, and Colonel Tremayne, who had only just succeeded in knowing his own mind, was a vast way from knowing anything of his companion's.

All that he perceived was that the pleasant mood he had found her in had suddenly disappeared, and that the distance between them was as great as ever it had been before they had broken the ice. He could see indeed that something discordant had arisen between them; what that something was he knew not, but he could see too that it would be injudicious for him to inquire too closely what this something was.

The Countess rose from her seat; her sunny smile of a while ago had clouded over again, her glance upon him was cold and unsympathetic, and he could hardly associate her manner with what it had been a moment before. She swept from the room with only a word or two of necessary parting, and even those were spoken in a tone so indifferent and distant as to leave him in no doubt that

some very disagreeable impression had been made upon her mind.

As she was leaving the room Lord George entered. He witnessed the stiff and formal parting, and he saw it not without some feeling of satisfaction.

"Well, Jim, you see she won't have you; she's flying at bigger game than you, old man, or else she doesn't believe in those diamonds. It's too like one of their own tricks."

"George," said Tremayne, with no little seriousness, "I am going to ask you to do me a favour. Will you do it?"

"Anything in the world—except help you to marry that woman."

"I mean to marry her, my dear fellow, and you are going to help me."

"I won't! She is an adventuress; she is the companion of a scoundrel; and you, why —you're an ass, simply!"

"No doubt; but for all that you are going to help me."

"Am I?" said his cousin ironically.

"Yes, you are; and you will change your mind when you know as much as I am going to tell you."

Lady Diana appeared in the gallery above.

"Di!" her brother called to her, "come

down here and listen to your cousin Jim. He has got it into his simple head and is going to prove to me that the Countess is an angel, the General a model of fathers, and Bauer a respectable member of society!"

"Ah!" said Lady Diana cautiously.

"Poor old Jim is so awfully simple, isn't he?"

"You think so?"

She glanced from the half-angry half-laughing face of her brother to that of her cousin, quite impassive under these multiplied taunts, and could not tell on which side good reason lay.

"I know he is, and you know it yourself, Jim," he cried impatiently, and turning upon his cousin. Tremayne laughed. "Oh, it was always so in the old days at Baden," Lord George went on. "Stone used to do what he liked with you, that rascal Bauer turned you round his little finger, and Nancy Stone—why, you are her slave to this day! Oh," he said, breaking off suddenly, "I am going to have such a jolly row with that rascal Bauer!"

"You had much better leave him to me," observed Tremayne quietly.

"Leave him to you? No, no! I shall

have it out with the rascal myself. I'll make the place too hot to hold him."

"Now, George, I know you mean well, but you are going to do me no end of mischief."

Lord George shook his head.

"You are upsetting all my plans," said Tremayne. "By Jove! a bull in a china shop is a mild image of the nuisance you are making of yourself! Diana, can't you keep your brother quiet?"

Lady Diana shook her head. "I never could!" she said.

"Well," went on Tremayne, "if I could tell you the whole story, perhaps you would not be in such a hurry; but I can't—not yet, at least."

"Devilish mysterious and romantic, no doubt," cried Lord George. "No, no! plain sailing is my way, and I am just going to 'sail into' our friend Bauer, as Miss Langham's people would say!"

"You are? Well, I must see if I can't stop you. Now, look here! be rational, there's a good fellow; I've got to set my wits against the fellow. After that you may do as you like. Do you see?"

"Your wits, my dear old Jim! You really make me laugh."

"Now listen, both of you. You think I haven't found out Bauer. Why, I tell you, I know that man to be one of the biggest scoundrels going. I've owed the rascal a grudge for the last five years."

"Did he win of you at cards? I always thought he would. I'm really glad you lost your money too!"

"Money? By Jove, if that was all! Oh, yes, he won a hundred pounds of me in Vienna at piquet after I left you and the Stones at Baden. I had my reasons for playing with him. I stopped when I was quite sure he was using marked cards. I got the pack from the head of the police as a curiosity; but that's a trifle. Why, that man has done me more harm than all my enemies put together; he has hurt me more than all the bad luck of all my life. He had lied against me, slandered me, turned from me the heart of a woman I loved, made her life a misery to her, gone near to ruin her reputation, and——"

Lord George listened incredulously. "And you mean to be even with him?"

"Yes, I mean to be even with him at last, and I mean you and Diana to help me. I have been working at it for a month past."

"The devil you have!"

"I had better tell you the story in three words: Bauer has got poor old Stone somehow into his debt and into his power. He knows the value to him of Stone's good birth, good appearance, and good manners, and takes care he shall not slip through his fingers. Bauer, as you see, is nothing but a vulgar adventurer, one of those fellows who swarm on the Continent, of no particular nationality. He chooses to call himself a German; he lies. He is of some obscure mongrel breed, with the languages, the cunning, and the vices of all the nations. By himself he is nothing, clever as he is; he is too flagrant an impostor for anyone to be taken in by him, but when he is seen in company with General Stone and above all, the Countess, his sins of behaviour are forgiven him, nobody asks about his antecedents; his pluck and his dash carry him on, and he has been a power on the Continent for years past. When I wanted to marry Miss Stone, Bauer saw at once that his ascendency was in danger. Had I been rich then, as I am now, he might have found his account in it, perhaps even seen his way to making a tool of me as he had of the General, and as

he has of others; for it is part of the overweening self-sufficiency of the man to believe that his cunning and his bluster combined will master anyone he uses them upon. But I was a poor man then, useless to him and his schemes. He intrigued to stop my marriage with Nancy Stone. Heaven knows what plots he used, and what lies he invented to sunder us. He lied of me to her, of her to me. He got his way; then, to make sure the separation was for ever, and to advance certain other schemes of his own, he resolved to marry Miss Stone to Count Schimmerling, a man of good birth, but a ruined gambler, tarnished in his reputation, a weak fool who had himself come under Bauer's thumb.

"Slowly, one by one, I have unravelled Bauer's villainies and Bauer's lies. At last I hold him in my hand. He does not suspect that I have found him out; he never did. It is in the character of the man to think the rogues of the world a wiser race than the honest men. He honestly believes that everyone who is not a liar is a fool, and I am glad to think he pays me the compliment of classing me among the abject fools; on no other terms could I have hoped to be even with him. He is too reckless to care to remember

that a knave is always being entangled by his own lies—Bauer's are like the sands of the sea—and his theory is that there is no lie so great, so gross, and so palpable but that a sufficient amount of flattery or bluster will carry it off. Wherever the man has passed, there is the track of the lies he has told, thick in the path. You have but to pick them up to have him and his reputation at your mercy."

"Well! then, why wait any longer? Why let him stay any longer on false pretences in a respectable house? Kick him out at once, my dear Jim!"

"Don't be in such a hurry, George. You forget that there are more things concerned than the punishment of a blackguard; there is the honour of a gentleman to consider, and the reputation of a woman. Besides which, I have always thought the best way of having it out with a swindler is to make him serve one's own ends. I have a fancy to make Bauer serve mine."

"Take care he doesn't make you serve his!"

"You may trust me," said Tremayne quietly.

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I am going to make Bauer himself undo all the mischief he has done. Whether I use force or persuasion in the first instance will depend upon circumstances."

"Persuasion with a villain! Denounce him, my dear fellow, and have done with him."

"Denunciation is not punishment enough for such a blackguard. Bauer is not a common rascal; he is too cunning, I am afraid, to give the law a chance of touching him, the lawyer's meshes are too big for him. It is a case where every honest man's duty is to play at detective, to give the law a lift and help it on, and if the law can't punish him, then, you know, there is natural justice. I am going somehow to make Bauer sore and sorry he has been a cheat and swindler, and the cruel bully of a woman and an old man. I am going to make him wish he had never drawn the breath of life. I am going to punish him as he deserves, and as the hardest law is too merciful to punish him!"

"Good heavens!" cried Lord George, in consternation, "this sort of thing won't do here; you can't take the law into your own hands."

"No," said Tremayne reflectively, "I sup-

pose you wouldn't see it. Always living within sound of a policeman's footsteps, you get at last to be such terrible Philistines. I suppose my five years in the mountains out there have rubbed off a little of the model citizen. One gets less of a citizen and more of a man in a country like that!"

"My dear Jim," said Lady Diana, trying a softer form of moral suasion, "isn't this really very dreadful, and—and unchristian, you know? Ought one to be one's jury, judge, and—and——"

"Executioner? Well, Di, I think there are cases." Her cousin spoke very gently and considerately. "I remember when I was a boy at Eton, I caught a pickpocket at Windsor Fair. I punched his head, and let him go; that was taking the law into my own hands. You don't think it was wrong to have been executioner then, do you?"

"No," said Lady Diana, "perhaps not, but that was very different."

"For the last five years I have been where every honest man arrests his own criminals, and punishes them himself. It seems quite natural to be going to punish Bauer. He is such a frightful scoundrel, you know, Di, such a cruel, treacherous, bullying rascal. I can't

tell you what a relief it will be to me to bring him down."

He spoke to her so calmly, so genially, and so persuasively, that she ended by being persuaded and siding with him, but Lord George was by no means so indifferent to the prejudices of civilisation, and burst into the argument:

"This is all the damnedest nonsense! The simplest way is always the best. If he is beyond the law, as you think——"

"I am hoping he is not, if I give the law the lift I spoke of."

"Anyhow, if the law can't touch him, at least you can stop him here. You can say: 'Bauer, you're a swindler—clear out!'"

"And do you think he would?"

"If he did not, I should call up everyone within hearing, and say: 'This fellow has got into an honest house under false pretences. He's a swindler; he won a hundred pounds of me at Vienna by using marked cards. I've got the pack. He won five hundred pounds from my cousin at Baden; that time it was by false cards up his sleeve. Since then he has risen in the scale of sharpers, and he is known to be a financial fraud-monger on every exchange in Europe. So now, Herr

von Bauer, that you are exposed, make yourself scarce—clear out!' Eh! what would the rascal say to that?"

"He would naturally say, 'Prove it!' and you couldn't at once, you couldn't for a very long time, perhaps not at all, and till you could he would lie and be indignant, and libel everyone, and make such a row and contrive so much mischief that you would heartily repent having meddled with him, and not having left him to me to deal with."

CHAPTER XII.

LORD GEORGE was roused. He believed he saw his cousin on the eve of an enormous blunder. Bauer's villainy and its punishment were but a trifle to him, but he guessed the man was plotting to secure Tremayne and his wealth for the Countess, and he thought he saw what an easy prey he would have in his guileless cousin. That alarmed him, and he was determined to be beforehand with the rogue.

"Your way, George," Tremayne said argumentatively, "is a good way in an ordinary case and with a common impostor; but this is not an ordinary case, and Bauer is a man with resources. Apart from all this, you forget the General and the Countess. An open scandal would be very unpleasant for them, and it would not help me with the

Countess, or help her or her father, who are at present entirely in the rascal's power."

"Help them? Oh, the devil help them! We'll turn out Bauer anyhow, and let him take his precious Countess and her father with him!"

"Hush!" cried Lady Diana, whose ear caught the sound of footsteps on the gallery, "they are coming!" and they saw the Countess gracefully descending the stairs, with Bauer in attendance upon her.

Tremayne came near Lord George in the interval while the pair were coming down, and spoke in his ear: "George, you really must not break out yet—don't, there's a good fellow!"

"Won't I though?" He walked up to his sister. "Di, we'll make a bold stroke of it, and finish the game off-hand. Get Jim away somewhere and leave the rest to me."

"Oh, George, are you certain it's for the best? Jim seemed so perfectly sure of what he was saying."

"Sure? Why, just look at the fellow he thinks he's going to humbug—just look at them both! There's swindler and confederate written in every line of their faces!"

While this was passing between the brother

and sister, Tremayne had approached Bauer, and was addressing some trifling remark to him in an ordinary tone. The Countess held herself, seemingly intentionally, a little aloof, and Lady Diana, taking her cue from her brother, approached the two men and interrupted their talk by putting her hand on Colonel Tremayne's arm, and saying in a tone to be heard by the others:

"Oh, Jim, do come and let me show you the kennels; you know you said you wanted to see Sir John's Gordon setters."

Colonel Tremayne saw the manœuvre.

"What kennels? What setters? I don't know of any setters."

"How can you say so?" cried Lady Diana, "do come!"

He looked at Bauer—at Lord George. Bauer was smiling, over-affable, obsequious, prepared as usual for an emergency. Lord George's brow was black. He turned to look at the Countess: her head was erect, her brow too was slightly bent; she was contemplating Lady Diana and himself with an expression of haughty and freezing contempt that was altogether inexplicable. He did not like to leave these three people to their own devices, but his cousin's invitation to him was not to

be resisted without absolute incivility. He went out with her.

The instant they left the room, Lord George addressed Bauer, and his tone was unusual—so short and so peremptory that there was no mistaking his intention.

"I will leave you, gentlemen," said the Countess, turning towards the stairs.

Lord George made a step towards her, as if to interrupt her retreat, and he did not much soften the tone he had used with Herr von Bauer.

"By no means, Countess; what I have to say concerns you as much as it concerns your —friend."

The Countess turned slowly, so as to front him as he spoke; she drew herself up to her fullest height, she looked at him with an inquiring smile, she raised her eyebrows almost imperceptibly, she swept him an infinitesimally slight curtsy, and then, without speaking a word, she continued on her way to the staircase, ascended it slowly, and disappeared through one of the doors of the gallery above.

"Good business, that," he said to himself, "and I deserved it!"

The anger that was in him however was

but diverted in a stronger current against the adventurer who stood before him.

This gentleman clearly perceived that something was in the wind; he was not unused to such encounters as he now saw was inevitable. There was a smile on his face that was compounded in equal degrees of cunning and impudence.

"Herr von Bauer," said Lord George, shortly and decisively, "I always like to come to the point on a matter of business."

Bauer rubbed his hands together in cheerful acquiescence with the sentiment.

"There is nothing like it, Lord George Vivash! It is the charming characteristic of your charming countrymen!"

Lord George lost command over his temper immediately, as no doubt Bauer meant that he should.

"Beast!" he muttered. No sound issued from his lips, but they were so clearly formed to syllable this particular word, that the poorest linguist in the world in Bauer's place could be under no illusion thereafter as to his lordship's opinion of him.

"My lord!" cried he angrily and roughly.

It is difficult to imagine the violence in the way of storm which would have occurred

between the angry indignation of Lord George and the overbearing malevolence of Von Bauer, had not an interruption taken place, and from an unexpected quarter.

The tempest was in the very act to break when Colonel Tremayne, whose time had seemed disposed of for the rest of the afternoon, sauntered idly into the room.

Lord George was disconcerted. "Hullo!" he cried, looking at his cousin, who quietly drew a chair and sat down between the two enemies as those gentlemen stood defiantly facing each other. "Hullo, Jim, I thought you were going over the kennels with my sister?"

"Oh no," he said gravely, and in a tone of the deepest conviction, "it wouldn't do at all. The light was thoroughly bad for looking at setters. Wouldn't do them any sort of justice. Positively unfair to any dog"—his mild and measured tone of voice was in curious contrast with the smothered excitement of the two others—"so we put off the inspection."

He took out his cigar-case and began to pick out a cigarette. As if by an afterthought, he offered one to his cousin.

"Have one? Egyptian tobacco; not bad."

"No, thanks," said Lord George, trying to suppress his ill-temper. "I smoke Russian."

"Have one, Bauer?" said Tremayne, handing the open case to him. Von Bauer followed Lord George's lead, as surlily and shortly.

"Thanks! I shmoke Durkish."

All three men sat down, lighted their cigarettes in silence and began to smoke. Tremayne had some difficulty in preserving his gravity. He ventured a safe remark.

"Weather very threatening still; kind of storm hanging over."

"Kind of a mist we're in," said Lord George, eyeing his cousin impatiently.

"Better that than a storm," said Tremayne, and he drew his chair a little forward to separate the two men more effectually.

"I don't know that," said Lord George, leaning across him to glare savagely at the German; "we should have it over sooner."

"Unless it should happen to last," returned Bauer, drawing his chair too in line of attack, and returning the look vindictively.

Lord George began at last to see the complete absurdity of the situation. He got up, and laughing a little, said to his cousin: "I shall go out for a turn before it comes down."

Tremayne followed him to the door, as if he still distrusted his forbearance.

"Good-bye, Jim," said Lord George in an undertone, holding the door-handle in his hand, "you have done me this time, old fellow, but wait a little, my turn will come presently!"

Tremayne returned to his seat, lit another cigarette, and smoked it in silence.

"Your cousin is a queer person, Colonel Tremayne."

"Queer, is he? Yes, perhaps, but a good fellow. Best friend I have. Don't abuse him, you know!"

"Oh, we are old friends, Lord George and I," he laughed, "he pears me a grutch though! We played at cards together—he won? I won? Which was it did win? It was so long since!"

The rogue looked closely into Tremayne's face, to gather from it if this story of the card-playing had been made public, and was Lord George's grievance, and the motive of his anger. He could get no help from Colonel Tremayne, who made no sign whatever. He went on:

"I think I did win. Yes! No! Can you recollect? Perhaps he did win from me; it was at écarté."

He saw no surprise at this version of the story on Tremayne's placid countenance, and thought he might venture a little farther.

"Ah, to be sure! I recollect now; it was all night we played, and in the morning we settled our little cheques, and he won vive hondert pounds—it was at écarté."

Tremayne could restrain his feelings no longer.

"Vivash won five hundred pounds of you, Bauer! The deuce he did!" He laughed out. "Ah! sharp fellow, Lord George; take care of him, Bauer! And at écarté too! Oh, you shouldn't have let yourself be led on. Five hundred pounds! Really now, it's very wrong of George; though he is my cousin I must say it!"

Bauer watched Tremayne suspiciously as he was speaking, but his face gradually cleared of its doubts as the Colonel went on, his outspoken tone reassured the adventurer. No one is clever at all points, and the weak point of Bauer, as of some others of his kind and calling, was that he never exactly knew what was taking place when he was being laughed at. Irony in its simplest form was wholly incomprehensible to him, and if a victim or a critic

chaffed him, he took it, poor man! to be the maundering folly of a particularly simple person.

It was clear, he fully believed, that Colonel Tremayne had heard nothing of Lord George's loss of five hundred pounds. The story, not being to the credit of his lordship's sagacity, had evidently not been published by him, and it was clear to him that Tremayne, accepting Bauer's version, was actually enjoying a personal triumph in the superior astuteness of his cousin and best friend. The simpleton! He might surely venture to play a little more on such overweening vanity.

"You and I too, Colonel, we have played!"

"Yes, we have."

"Let me see, now!" the German laid his finger on his nose, a favourite and perhaps unconscious gesture when he felt more than commonly knowing. "How hard to recollect! Who was it did win, you or me? We played at—at—at——"

"At piquet."

"Ah! you was a fine player, cool and careful, a very good head! Which did win, now, you or me?"

"Yes, which was it? I remember it was

in a rather shady house you took me to in Vienna, off the Martins Strasse—the Maison d'Or—and in a small room set round with looking-glasses."

Bauer looked at him doubtfully. Colonel Tremayne had been a poor man at the time; he certainly could not be persuaded into really thinking he had won a hundred pounds when he had in fact lost them, but clearly the loss, associated as it seemed to be in his memory with so many particular circumstances, was not a pleasant recollection; it would be a master stroke of flattery to assume that Tremayne had won. Was the man vain enough and simple enough to swallow the bait? He wanted to gain him; he thought he might venture.

"Ha! yes, you was a remarkable player, and you held bad cards too, and"—pausing a moment to watch again, and then breaking out—"you beat me!"

Colonel Tremayne smiled complacently but said nothing.

"I was right to venture it!" thought Bauer. "He was always a simpleton, a straightforward English fool."

"Well, Herr von Bauer, you must not grudge me my little triumph over you at

cards. Perhaps I *am* a remarkably fine player—I mustn't boast; but don't let it rankle, my dear sir; one can't be good all round, and remember how you got the better of me in another matter."

"The Countess!"

Tremayne nodded.

Bauer laughed, in a way that he meant to be particularly amicable and sympathetic. "What would you have, my friend? It was for her goot that I put what you call a spoke in your wheel."

"Ah! you call that putting a spoke in my wheel! I remember you told some infernal lies about me, did you not, Herr von Bauer?"

"Lies, sir?" retorted the German sharply, and with rising indignation. He looked into the Colonel's face to see if there was any sign of an intended slight to him; he found only the look of placid nonchalance and good-humour which he had never yet seen ruffled.

Colonel Tremayne was, in Bauer's judgment, so far from suspecting that he was on the brink of arousing any undue susceptibilities on the part of his companion that he continued in the same measured tone as he had used before.

"Ye-es, lies. I know, my dear Herr, you won't mind my saying they were about the most astounding series of lies I ever heard. You won't be offended if I repeat—quite infernal lies!"

Bauer was taken aback. This English phlegm puzzled him. Should he resent this strange language or not? There was dignity to be asserted by repudiating such charges; but the coolness of the man who was making them, the singular absence in him of the conventionally moral and denunciatory tone which simple Englishmen so constantly use in speaking on this topic, struck Bauer strongly. It caused him to think that his account might on this occasion perhaps lie in not being too over-righteously indignant. Was Colonel Tremayne after all *not* one of the simple, upright "English fools?" He had lived long among crafty Orientals, away from his own narrow-thoughted, moralising countrymen. Moreover, he had made much money. Assuredly he could be no such simpleton; a man to be flattered, of course—all men are—but no simpleton.

Over and above these considerations, a very curious emotion was being roused in Bauer's breast. The greatest men have their weaknesses, and Bauer, in the presence of this

apparent thaw in the frigid English moral atmosphere, began to feel within him a genial glow, a benign warmth towards his companion. Under this feeling his short-lived indignation wholly vanished; a sympathetic and expansive emotion took its place, and his features relaxed to a pleasing grin.

"My friend," he said—the finger again played round the large and aquiline nose—"my friend, I see you can appreciate der lie as a work of art! I do confess——"

"And so do I, Herr von Bauer, that you are a great artist in this line. I always knew it. And now, my good Herr, I want you to do me a little favour."

"Can you doubt that I will?"

"Not for a moment! I am so very rich."

"Ah, bah! my friend, it is not that! I pray you not to shock my Jairman delicacy. I was always your friend, even after you won that money from me. It was von hondert pounds."

"Yes, the amount is correct. Suppose, though, we drop that transaction for the present; I am thinking of that other time when you, as you expressed it, put that spoke in my wheel, I am going to ask you now to——"

"To tell some lies in your favour? Oh, mit pleasure!"

"Nothing of the kind. I shall trouble you to undo all the mischief you have done me already—to tell the truth."

"The troof? Oh, I tell him too, sometimes."

"No! you don't say so!"

Bauer glanced round the room to make sure of being alone, and put on an expression of superlative cunning, as he dropped his voice to a more confidential tone.

"Oh, but only when I know I shall not be pelieved! Then people, finding out afterwards it was true what I had said, they cry out: 'Why, that what we thought one of his most tamntest lies was troof! Hey! And they pozzle over it, and pozzle——"

"To be sure, I see, and they believe your next lie? Capital!"

"Ha! Colonel Tremayne, I am showing you our new modern, improved system of treating the diplomatic, the political, the social, the moral questions."

"Devilish moral!" muttered Colonel Tremayne under his breath.

"Yes, as you say, the moral questions, and, above all, the financial questions. Ach!

my friend, what should I do without our new system in the high finance, the new companies, *en commandite*—joint-stock, as you say here, limited; with our boards of directors, promotion money, articles of association, extraordinary meetings, calls, advances—all so simple and so easy!"

"I should say," observed Tremayne with critical calmness, "that it was the shareholders who were simple and easy."

The poor jest told severely upon Bauer; he laughed till the tears came into his eyes; he rolled in his chair with flattering and subservient merriment.

"*Simple and easy!* yes, yes, my friend, you are quite right! And is it not fortunate? How you know the world, Himmel! what a head you have for business—cards, piquet, business, travels, engineering, diamonds, all is one to you! Ach! dearest friend, you and I together against the world—hey? What fortunes we could make! I bringing with me my little experiences, picked up in the Bourses—the Exchanges—of the Continent; you contributing your great knowledge of the world——"

"And you, your large capital."

"Ach, no, no!" cried Bauer, alarmed, "you

the capital; but that would be a bagatelle—a flea-bite."

"Very well, then; if you are sure it is to be only a flea-bite, it's all right. But what should we do? Launch a company?"

"My friend, we would launch terventy!"

"And you think this new-fangled morality of yours would help us at that work? It seems to me very like old-fashioned swindling after all."

"There is a resemblance," said Bauer, "oh yes! there is a superficial resemblance—in die form—but, Himmel! what a difference in *die Wesenheit*—in, as you say, the substance. For listen, Colonel Tremayne, I would not say this new thing is an invention of my own. That is not so; in politics and in all these things that I tell you of it has been tried; but in one thing only by me"—he tapped his forehead proudly—"by Friedrich von Bauer—that is, in finance. Ha! that is my little useful secret to me in the Bourses. For, see here! what is this device? It is one which takes the place of many old things that were goot once, and what are they now? What are learning, wit, cleverness, *esprit*, and all that! Ha, my friend! We of the new school never waste argument to prove that

black is white; but we go to the clever, the learned, the witty men, the men of *esprit*, and all that, and we say, 'On our solemn word of honour, this which you take to be black is white;' and they say 'No;' and we say, 'By all we hold sacred, it is white,' and they laugh. 'On our oafs, it is white!' we cry out, and they only shake their kopfs. Then we go on asseverating and saying, 'We swear it is perfectly white, and never was anything but white, and will be white to the end of time, and could not possibly be anything but white!' and at last they are staggered, they hear the word 'white' so often. 'Oh, it must be white,' they cry, 'and our eyes have seen wrong;' and then, goot honest fools, they go home quite happy, and contented, and comfortable, and they go to sleep thinking it is no longer black; and they wake up next morning, and behold you! it is very black indeed, as black as pitch! So! and then we rob our hands and laugh at our *esprit*—for that is our idea of *esprit*. How do you like him?"

"Immensely; but, as you say, he is not original. I have heard a good deal of him quite lately."

At this moment, the door of the court-

yard, through which Lord George had gone out, opened; Professor Dredge appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, Colonel!" he exclaimed, "here you are! I was looking for you. Lord George wants——"

"Lord George?" Tremayne laughed and looked at Bauer. "I think I understand. Do you, Herr?"

The Herr expressed by the look of surprise on his face that he did not understand at all.

"No, Professor," said Tremayne, "I cannot possibly leave my dear friend, Herr von Bauer. If you see my cousin, would you mind telling him so—in those very words, please? Thank you," he added, as the Professor nodded his consent and withdrew.

Colonel Tremayne resumed in a more serious manner. Bauer thought he detected in it the touch of a graver purpose than he had noticed before, but though a shrewd he was not an observant person, and in some points his shrewdness was remarkably hindered by native bluntness.

"Well, Herr, you are so very clever that you will see at once that I shall require

you to go to General Stone and to the Countess, and — well, to swallow all the infernal lies you have told them about me."

Bauer was not seemingly either shocked or insulted by this very cool request, but he seemed saddened by it; he shook his head despondently.

"Ah! you object? Goes against your conscience as an artist, eh?"

Still the man was in no wise hurt in his feelings.

"My conscience, nein, not at all. But, ach! there is a derrible difficulty."

"A difficulty, Herr von Bauer, which you will please to see your way to get over at once."

Bauer seemed really distressed at not being able to oblige his friend in so small a matter, and was beginning to explain his reasons when the conference was again interrupted. This time it was Captain Shendy who appeared at the door, holding the handle in his hand just as the Professor had done a moment before.

"Colonel Tremayne," he began, "I was looking for you."

Tremayne laughed. "Does my cousin Vivash want me?"

"Yes; and he asked me if I saw you to say——"

"May I beg you to tell Lord George from me that I am engaged with my friend Herr von Bauer in a most private and particular conversation?"

"Certainly, Colonel," and the young man turned to close the door.

"And, Captain Shendy, if you wouldn't mind, would you say those words, 'a private and particular conversation'—would you kindly remember?"

"All right, Colonel! 'Private and particular.' All right!"

The door was shut, and Tremayne remarked:

"I had to make a point of the very words, or we might be interrupted again. By-the-bye, Bauer, do you guess why Lord George wants to see you?"

"You mean, why he wants to see *you?*"

"Me? Deuce a bit. It is you, my dear sir, that he wants. He wants to get me out of the way, and to have a 'go in' at you."

Bauer was startled and alarmed, and showed it very clearly.

"At me? And pray why?"

"Yes, at you; and do you know that as soon as I have gone out at that door," Tremayne pointed to one in the gallery, "which I shall do presently, Lord George will come in by this one," he pointed to the door by which Captain Shendy had just retired, "and when he does come in, he means to 'sail into' you; it was the expression he used, and it struck me as an odd one. That is my cousin's idea of *esprit;* how do you like him?"

Bauer could no longer pretend not to understand his contemptuous treatment by the man who, a moment before, he thought was going to be a fresh and willing tool in his hands.

"Sir!" he said, trying hard to swagger under the cold gaze of Colonel Tremayne, "I will trouble you to explain yourself."

"Willingly. You see, Lord George has a very tenacious memory, and it happens that he does not remember that little transaction at cards exactly as you do. He imagines that it was you who won, not that he did; and he has a recollection, and not the least a vague one, of having seen some cards up your sleeve. He wants to tell you all this."

Bauer scowled with rage, and breathed malice and defiance; but for the moment he found no words to express his feelings.

Tremayne went on, as if he desired nothing else than to enrage the man:

"What! you don't seem to appreciate that form of *esprit?*"

"Colonel Tremayne!" cried Bauer, starting to his feet, "do you wish to affront me?"

Tremayne remained seated, and looked at him for a minute, without any concealment of the intense antipathy and contempt he felt for him. His only answer was to point to the chair from which the man had risen, and to say: "Sit down again!"

Bauer was puzzled and staggered by the sudden sternness of Colonel Tremayne's manner. He took his seat in silence, still angry and still frowning; but he waited for what was coming.

"I have taken the trouble to listen to your scoundrelly confidences, because I wanted to be sure of what I have often suspected, that is, that you might be nearly as great a fool as you are a blackguard. You have gone beyond my expectations. That you should have preached your doctrine of lies and villainy to an English gentleman, that you should have

dreamt he could consent to it, proves that you are rather a greater idiot than you are a rascal. I had my reasons for wanting to establish that fact."

Bauer moved uneasily in his chair.

"You had better sit still and listen to me. You are likely soon to hear what you will like a good deal less. I have told you what I did of Lord George's opinion of you because I wanted you to understand that it is I alone who have stood between you and a talk with my cousin and full exposure. I require one thing of you, and one only; getting it, I may perhaps let you down a little easier than I should otherwise. You have intrigued between the Stones and myself. I don't know the particular falsehoods you employed, or I perhaps should not have need of your help; so I require you to go at once and undo them —make confession that they were nothing but gross and unfounded lies. Now let me see if you can get over that little difficulty you spoke of."

Bauer was subdued. He would have blustered still, but he saw the uselessness of bluster with one so sure of himself and of his resources as Colonel Tremayne. He saw it was his only policy to submit.

"Ach!" he said, "it is sad, but the difficulty is insurmountable."

"Is it?" said Tremayne, rising, "then I shall have to set matters right in another way. I will send Lord George to you in a moment."

"But listen!" cried Bauer, in extremity of alarm. "Do you not see where is my difficulty?"

"No, I do not."

Tremayne walked to the door, but waited for a moment to listen, as Bauer stood in the centre of the room, gesticulating and speaking with extraordinary animation.

"Why, it is plain!" he cried, with raised shoulders and extended palms. "How can I persuade the Countess they were lies that I told her, and that she believed? How can I undo the mischief I have made? Do you not see that she would never believe me? For five years she has perhaps never even once heard the troof from me, and now when I open my lips, she naturally say to herself: 'Here is a lie coming!' Oh! it is very, very sad!"

"Very sad indeed!" said Colonel Tremayne, and, regardless of a last despairing exclamation from Bauer, he opened the door. As

he did so, Miss Langham was entering the room.

"Oh, Colonel Tremayne!" cried the young lady, apparently overwhelmed with surprise and delight at actually finding him in the hall, "how very glad I am to see you! We must positively go out and see Ben Cruachan in this light. It must be lovely! Do come!"

"It was Lord George who suggested it, was it not?" asked Colonel Tremayne.

"It was. Why do you ask?"

"Only that I thought it might be." He advanced to where the young lady stood. "I am entirely at your service, Miss Langham."

"Colonel Tremayne!" cried Bauer, running to the door, but it was too late. Tremayne and Miss Langham had left the room, and the adventurer ran into the very arms of Lord George, as that gentleman entered.

The two men faced each other in no pleasant mood. Lord George lost no time in speaking out his mind.

"Herr von Bauer! I take the first opportunity to tell you to your face that I know you to be an adventurer, a swindler, and a

card-sharper; you have no business under a respectable roof, and unless you clear out from here within an hour, I'll expose you!"

Bauer turned at bay. He was more in his element now, and found the anger and unmeasured vituperation of his new assailant far easier to deal with than the contemptuous irony of Colonel Tremayne. Lord George's attack was of a kind he was not unused to, and he knew tolerably well how to meet it. He swaggered, he raised his voice, and he blustered.

"Do you wish to insult me, my lord; hey? I tell you this bullying will not pass with me. If there are no laws in this country to stop the mouth of a libeller, there are laws of honour common to all countries, which not even the privileges of a British nobleman can——"

"Come, come, sir, don't talk damned nonsense! Do you think a British potboy would condescend to fight with a swindler like you?"

Bauer saw that bluster would not, after all, avail him much; but he had other weapons to fight with. He cooled immediately, and assumed a sneering and impudent grin, which was peculiarly offensive.

"A convenient theory, my lord, but it will hardly avail you."

"Indeed! How so?"

"Only that you have allowed things to go too far. You have let your friend receive me into his house; do you think you can turn upon me now, when we have a private difference, and say: 'This man is a villain; to serve my private ends, I denounce him. While my host was admitting him to the sanctities of his home and of his family I held my peace, but the moment my selfish interests are invaded I cry out, I become the honourable English gentleman, who cannot abide where fraud is.' Miserable hypocrisy! I say you cannot do it, Lord George Vivash!"

"You plausible scoundrel! You know as well as I do why I did not have you turned out of the house the moment you set foot in it."

"Do I?"

"You know it was no consideration for you, but for the old man, whom I believe to be your dupe—for the family he belongs to and the uniform he has worn."

"Ay, ay, the General! Very goot! Then I would ask, why, if you did not speak then, you speak now? Eh? Is the Countess for nothing in your calculations?"

"The Countess von Schimmerling?"

"Yes! that angel of innocence and purity! Ah, my dear Countess, you little know the chivalry of your admirer! For you are her admirer, Lord George—confess it. You know it and she knows it."

"Why, you infernal scoundrel——" began his lordship, more astounded perhaps than ever he had been in his life before; but Bauer cut him short with a new tirade.

"*Lof!*" he cried, affecting a mock lyrical style which was almost more than Lord George could bear, "what a light art thou in our darkness! I was wondering what all these lies mean, about these cards, this swindling, and all the rest, and now I see it all so clear! So clear that I will trouble you for no more explanation, Lord George. Ah! you guess your friend Colonel Tremayne lofs the Countess too, and she him, and you are jealous, and you would part these turtle-duffs, and prevent the course of true lof to run smooth!"

"The course of——why, what lies are you inventing now?"

"Ha! Lord George, and you say to yourself, 'Von Bauer is their friend, Von Bauer will help them—Von Bauer shall be removed

by fair or foul means from my path;' and you plot and you contrive. Soh! but I will plot too! I will set my wits against yours! Come now, the foreign adventurer, villain, and swindler against the English nobleman!"

Bauer delivered himself with such surprising volubility, with so much most offensive facial and bodily contortion, backing towards the door, all the time he was speaking, to secure the last word, and finally with a low ironical bow and a parting grin disappearing altogether so suddenly, that Lord George, between astonishment and anger and disgust at the man, had been unable to get in a single word.

He remained standing alone in the middle of the room, looking at the closed door, his hands plunged deep into his trouser pockets, his legs well apart, and so overcome in his feelings that, for the first time probably in his life, he found himself delivering a soliloquy, after the manner of the heroes of the melodramatic stage:

"What an unutterable rascal! What a dodging, lying, boasting, bragging, transpontine sort of villain it is! *I* never cared for the woman! Not a scrap! Not a scrap!"

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was a very fortunate circumstance for Lord George, that the person who, at this juncture of affairs, opened one of the doors leading to the gallery and, looking down, perceived his lordship so distinctly under the influence of an overmastering emotion, standing in an attitude so strikingly expressive at once of astonishment and unbounded indignation, and giving such audible expression to those emotions without listeners, was no more severe a critic of him than his own sister. Placing her hands on the banister-rails, she looked down upon him for a time in silence, listening in amazement to his ejaculations.

"George! George! What do you mean? How can you be so utterly ridiculous?"

"Eh! What? Why ridiculous?"

"Soliloquising in that perfectly absurd way. What is it all about, and who dreams

of accusing you of caring for anybody? *You*, of all people!"

"I don't care about her! I never did care a bit for her! Why, you know, Di, I never did!"

"For whom? Who is it?" Lady Diana, who had a pleasant, light-hearted sense of the ridiculous, could not but laugh at the extreme gravity and indignation of her brother. But he was moved beyond any perception of the humour of the situation.

"Of course she was very interesting and very lovely and very fascinating. Everyone sees that; but, upon my soul, I never dreamt——"

"But who?—who?—who?" His sister almost lost her temper, and tapped her foot impatiently. "George! if you only knew what an idiot you look at this moment!"

Lord George was preternaturally serious and absorbed; he was beyond any sense of appearances or of his own dignity.

"Naturally one likes to talk to such a woman, Di, and then the world—the censorious world——"

Lady Diana descended the stairs and came close up to her brother.

"Really you are quite unsupportable. Will you tell me who it is you are talking about?"

"Why, the Countess, of course. Didn't I say so!"

"Not a word! So you never did? Well, I always thought——"

"So did that beast, Bauer, or so he pretends. Oh, the villain—the inexpressible villain! His last trick is to help on a marriage between Jim and that woman, and to use me as a lever. Good heavens! Imagine Jim Tremayne marrying the Countess!"

"Well! and why not? I'm sure she is very nice and presentable and all that. The Stones are very good people somewhere in the West Riding. Jim must know his own mind by this time; he has been in love with her for five years, through good and bad report. Why should he not marry her?"

"Because she's one of a bad lot."

"Nonsense! There's nothing, or next to nothing, against the woman herself."

"Except her brother-in-law, and also that she's a frightful flirt!"

Lady Diana became wholly impatient.

"Oh! that horrid word. I hate it. One never hears it now, except in the mouth of cynical men like you, or puritanical old women like Mrs. Bent. The Countess is no more a flirt than I am."

"I never said she was."

"Then you mean to imply—— Now really this is too unfair! If the ordinary give and take of society is to be called flirting, we may as well give the whole thing up at once! If a woman is young and pretty and dresses well and talks well, *of course* men like her—of course they admire her—of course they rush about after her. Do you call *that* flirting?"

"Are you speaking for yourself, Di, or for the Countess?"

"For both—for every woman who is not a fright or a fool. I suppose you would not consider me too great a flirt to marry Jim Tremayne? Very well, then," she said, not waiting for assent to so obvious a proposition, "the Countess has a thousand times more excuse for what *you* call flirting, and *I* call rationally conforming to the ways of the world, than ever I had. Look at the wretched creature she married."

"Why did she marry him?"

"Now really, really, if that is not the most absurd remark that a man ever made. I should just like to ask you one question: Is it any affair of yours—who, being a man,

are necessarily stupid in such matters—why she married Count Schimmerling?"

"None whatever, but pray go on."

"Look, I say, at the wretched creature who was her husband for two years. A man steeped to the lips in all sorts of low vice, a fool, a gambler, a sot, and—and—bald!"

"I confess, my dear sister, I don't as yet seize your argument. It tells at present rather strongly against the lady's taste."

"George, I must simply beg you not to raise that question again. She married, I say, this dreadful man, and yet leads a—a—more or less blameless existence."

"'Rationally conforming,' however (I mustn't say the other word), 'to the ways of the world.'"

"No doubt, to a certain extent; and you say I do that. Very well, then! What excuse has she, and what have I, who am married to a man who is simply in every way the perfection of husbands?—I say, George, *to a man who is in every way a perfect husband!*"

She looked closely into her brother's face, as if even his higher critical cynicism could not find the shade of an objection to this proposition. Lord George kept a sedate

countenance, and was careful to commit himself to no look or word of criticism.

"Edward, as you know perfectly well, has the sweetest temper possible, is the most delightful companion in the world, is extraordinarily handsome, has not a single fault of any kind, and, as everyone admits, is brilliantly clever."

"Go on, Di," said Lord George softly, "I admit it all, but you are forgetting your argument."

"Is it possible you don't see the conclusion? If the Countess, so married, is to be compared as you say she is to be with me, having the husband I have, then what a paragon must she be!"

"Oh!" said Lord George astonished, "is that the conclusion?"

"Besides," said Lady Diana, suddenly losing hold of the close logical sequence of her reasoning, "she has been a widow for two years, and naturally——"

"Naturally, she conforms to the ways of the world."

"Naturally, to a certain degree she conforms. . . . Oh, yes, I see very well you are trying to laugh. People always do when they are in the wrong."

"My dearest Di, the point is this—not whether I am wrong, but whether Jim should marry that woman."

"My dearest George, the point is, is Jim old enough to know his own mind? 'That woman,' as you call her—as if you hadn't known poor Nancy Stone long enough and well enough not to talk of her as 'that woman'—is good enough for anybody, and if she will have Jim——"

"If *she* will have *him?*"

"Yes, if she will have him—I must observe that I think it is very doubtful—I say if she will, I'm sure I shall be delighted with my new cousin."

"And with your new cousin's brother-in-law?"

"Trust Jim to shake Bauer off. Ah! here he comes."

Lord George received Colonel Tremayne with a laugh, but it was evident that his cousin was in no laughing mood.

"Jim, I had you that time. I said I would. I've got at Bauer."

"Have you?" said Tremayne; "why, you're not in it, George. I had finished with Bauer before you began."

"You had? What had you done to him?

He was certainly rather excited when I had my talk with him."

"I gave him a last chance. He refused it; and now I shan't interfere to save him from his fate."

"Heavens! how mysterious you are. When is it going to overtake him, and in what shape?"

"I expect a couple of detectives will be inquiring for him by this time to-morrow."

"What, already? Well done! How have you managed that? That is really splendid! Di, I'm beginning to think Jim is a little deeper than we took him for. Well, the rascal floored me; he left off with the last word. Ha! what do you think? He tried to make out that I wanted to cut you out with the Countess."

"That lie is five years old," said Tremayne quietly. "Don't you recollect, he got me to believe that just as I was leaving for India? I was always sure it was he who got the report of the marriage into the papers."

"Surely it was not in the Indian papers?"

"Yes, of course it was, and copied from some English one."

"Now I know what sent you across the

frontier. You don't mean to say you were ass enough to believe——"

Tremayne looked black.

"I withdraw 'ass.' You don't mean to say that you believed that I wanted to marry the Countess? Why I never even——"

"How could I fail to believe it? The rumour had been spread just as I left. You see it was that rascal's interest to leave no stone unturned to make the story plausible. I believed it so fully, I was so wounded in my ideas about Nancy, that I never dreamt of seeing or writing to her, and asking her to confirm or deny the report. Bauer went with me as far as Trieste, where I took the steamer. He told me of the marriage as an unquestionable fact, as to which the General had consulted him. He was the last person I saw in Europe; almost the first thing I saw at Peshawur was the newspaper with the paragraph in it announcing the forthcoming marriage."

"The damned blackguard!"

"This is how he took me in. What lies he told Nancy I never knew, I have never been able to discover; but it was something so strong that it made her forget, and makes her still forget that she ever cared for me.

Yes, the game is about played out now. There is not another move for me, that I can see. Till I came here and saw her, and saw how bitter she was, I still had hopes of winning her; now I see that I must give it up."

"Don't say that, Jim," said Lady Diana, "I am sure she cares for you."

"Not one bit! she is as cold as ice. It's hard you know—by Jove! it's hard, when a man has had one object only before him and has schemed, and worked, and waited for it all through these long dreary years. Ah, George, you little know what I lose in losing that woman. I know you think I was following up my old fancy for her with my eyes shut, but you're wrong. I have traced out, where I was, all that was going on. I knew of her marriage. I remember it was in the first batch of letters I got from Europe, after I had been buried for six months in the wilds of the Northern Province. That it was which made me stay so long in the country. I knew the character of Schimmerling, I knew of Bauer's influence over him and over General Stone. I traced his hand in the marriage. I had myself kept informed from time to time of events here,

but of course only at uncertain intervals, ... I got the news of Schimmerling's death nearly a year after it occurred. Then I lost not a moment in coming home. I landed at Trieste two months ago, and I have been going everywhere on the Continent where I could gain intelligence of her past life, of her father, and of Bauer. For weeks past I have been tracing out the history of Bauer's villainy and her misery. You seem to think it is only a light fancy, my love for her. I thought myself when I saw her first, and saw her so changed and so hardened, that my feelings were changed as much as she was, but I was wrong; her deeper nature to me now is what it always was, and if it were not, if the outward change was thorough, and if I were quite convinced that what I formerly felt for her was but a passing caprice, what I actually know of her now would make me love her again. In these last few weeks, quite unknown to her, the whole history of the suffering and self-sacrifice of her life has been opened out before me like a book. In tracing out Bauer's intrigues against her, abroad and now here, I have learnt her real nature. I tell you that, if she had never been any-

thing to me, I should love her, knowing what I know of her now."

"By Jove! old fellow, you're pretty far gone! But what concern had you all this time with Bauer's doings?"

"Don't you see? I was hoping to free her and her father from him, knowing how he had wound himself into their lives, and been their bane and their secret enemy for so long. Then some day I would have said to them: 'From now you are free from the man who has oppressed you, henceforth he won't trouble you.' That I can say, or almost say now; then I come here and—and—find her like ice to me, bitter against me and not to be moved."

"Jim," said Lord George, and his usual cynicism had quite deserted him, "I am sorry for you with all my heart; but, hang it, you know! you are not the first man a woman has jilted. You must be reasonable. You leave a woman to herself for five years, and expect to find her what she was to you when you left her. It's absurd! It's not human nature, you know."

"No, of course not," said Tremayne, very despondently. "I'm an ass. I'll go."

"Oh, you men!" cried Lady Diana im-

patiently, "what babies you are about almost everything, and especially about women. Don't you see that the Countess—— No, I suppose that being men, you wouldn't. Dear me! how dreadful to have anything at all to do with you. Can't you understand, Jim, that Nancy is only——"

She looked into her cousin's face; but finding no intelligent response there, she did not finish her sentence.

"If you go away now, Jim," she said, "and leave her, I will never speak to you again."

Lord George meditated.

"Upon my soul, if I could see my way to help you, I would. What if I had a talk with her? We used to be very good friends. It's just a chance. Perhaps I could clear up some things. Let me see! I shall not sit next to her at dinner to-night. Madame de la Prétentaine is not staying, so Sir John will probably take the Countess in, and afterwards when the men come in, there is always a crowd round her chair; but to-morrow, after breakfast, I'll try to find her alone. There is the dressing gong!"

Tremayne shook his head very despon-

dently. Lord George, with his blunt and cynical ways, did not strike him as a promising ambassador; but he thought that any chance was an improvement on his present hopelessness.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT has been cynically alleged of some persons, expositors and patrons of art, that they had a great deal of taste, and that all of it was bad. Of Sir John Smith it could be said that he had a great deal of taste, and that all of it was good. Still this praise does not exclude the imputation that he might possibly have a little too much of that which is so good a thing.

If such a possibility could arise anywhere, it was at Glen Cruachan. We see so much wrong art displayed everywhere, we hear so much wrong art talked everywhere, that it is easy to believe that if we could but find ourselves in a haven where no true art canon was invaded, where no art critic preached false doctrine, and neither a bad picture, print, statue, nor decoration was visible, we should be in the seventh heaven of æsthetic

contentment; but perhaps it is not so. Reiteration of approval seems to pall, and the attitude of never-ending admiration gets to be a very wearying one.

We are all born critics, and are happiest when we can blame something or somebody. If one half of the population of these islands were not convinced that they were speeding on the road to ruin in one direction, while the other half of us were not as certain that we were travelling to perdition in a contrary one, there would be nothing left for us to fight for, and therefore to live for.

So with art. Progress towards perfection is of course devoutly to be desired, but may Heaven avert full consummation of our desires!

Some such wearisome Paradise was Glen Cruachan. Everything was so good, so beautiful, so right, and so gorgeous—and this gorgeousness too was clearly right, for if a retired ironmaster with five hundred thousand a year is not entitled to be gorgeous, who is? —that a sort of lotus-eating wearisomeness in time overcame Sir John Smith's guests. They had at last got tired of the paying of unending compliments to their host upon the successfulness and beauty of all about the

house, and of the house itself. Repetition of such obvious truths had grown utterly monotonous to them and must have palled upon Sir John himself. At last they got to think and talk no further of the lovely things they lived and breathed among, and walked on, and leant against and sat upon, than the Peris of the Persian mythology would be likely to think or talk of their rainbow-tinted wings, their perpetual youth, or their undying and monotonous loveliness.

Only new-comers to Glen Cruachan ever spoke of it at all, other subjects being so very much fresher. It was a pity, because in these days everybody who can talk at all can talk so brilliantly either in commendation or in derision of the æsthetic theory of life.

It was long past eight o'clock when the guests, headed by Sir John and Lady Diana Follett, went two and two into the dining-room: the five ladies available were apportioned to the five gentlemen of the party, according as Sir John's tact and general knowledge of their several characters judged they were most likely to give and derive social satisfaction; for Sir John, though nothing of a trivial person, always bestowed much attention on the due marshalling of his guests.

French cooks, choice wines, perfect decoration of table and room, he knew by experience go for nothing with even the best selection of guests, unless they be arranged according to their individual sympathies and antipathies. The rules of precedence, according to rank and age, were not unimportant things in his eyes, but he made them give way to more imperative necessities. That day, on the moors, he had meditated deeply on the matter. Of course, he would take the Countess in; as a fresh arrival, an important personage, and of high rank, her place was clearly at his right hand; but then there was Lady Diana. The person of the daughter of a duke, though she be married to a commoner, has ever a certain sanctity in the eyes of a middle-class Briton. Which of these two ladies was the most worthy, according to the great precedence code? He could not tell. Which, if either, would be most offended by not having the post of honour? He was puzzled to say. If he took in the Countess, certainly Lord George could not take in his own sister. On the other hand, he had perceived there was no great liking between Lord George and the Countess von Schimmerling. Then the Countess, too, though fascinating to a degree, was rather

formidable from the very excess of her charms, her brilliant foreign ways, and her cleverness generally; would he, a middle-aged manufacturer, find much to say that would entertain her?

Poor Sir John was perplexed with the equally balanced pros and cons, and wisely had recourse to an Englishman's usual escape from a dilemma; he put his hand in his waistcoat pocket, and drew out a coin—a sovereign—rested his gun in the hollow of his left elbow, and, tossing the sovereign in the air, caught it dexterously in his left hand, and cried quite eagerly: "Heads, the Countess; tails, Lady Diana!"

Alas! his voice raised a brace of grouse from his very feet, which the dogs had passed over, an easy "right and left." Instantly was the host lost in the sportsman, the gun was raised to his shoulder and both barrels fired. Sir John missed with his first barrel, being hurried, but brought down his bird at sixty yards with his second.

Then he bethought him of his sovereign, which had fallen from his hand before even he had seen it, and lay among the heather. He stooped to look for it. "Heads, the Countess; tails, Lady Diana," he kept on

repeating to himself during his long search for it; for an appeal to this form of Nemesis is not a thing we any of us care to trifle with, when once an invocation to the goddess has been made. At last he found the coin, "tails" uppermost.

"Ah," he said, "I take in Lady Diana, that's settled, and I will give the Countess to Colonel Tremayne—he's the lion of the party. They will have plenty to say to each other, and as he is a celebrity she'll be pleased. He shall have Lady Di on his left, whom he used to flirt with. Lord George shall have Miss Langham, who is pretty and whom he likes to chaff—she will like the arrangement of course too. Von Bauer shall take in Mrs. Bent; if they don't like each other, it doesn't much matter, and they will both hold forth to the party at large. General Stone takes Mrs. Longbow; a little incompatibility of ages, but he is good company and she shall sit on Lord George's left. There now! that will please them all—five couples. I ought to take in the Countess, but it didn't come 'heads': hang it! she shall sit at the bottom of the table and Lord George at the top; that will make it right to them both; and the odd men over—the men can sit together,

the three men, yes, three men"—for Captain Shendy had been sent for by express to ride a race in the south—"and we are thirteen. I'll ask Crighton, the author, from over the river."

Thus had Sir John employed all his tact and worldly shrewdness to contrive an agreeable dinner-party, and to a great extent he utterly failed, for the author, a popular and sensational novelist, was engaged, and the party were thirteen after all; and it happened that almost every person would have preferred to sit near someone else. There was between Colonel Tremayne and the Countess the awkwardness which the reader already knows of. General Stone felt that his "wit and wisdom" were wasted upon the pretty and ignorant little person assigned to him, and Mrs. Longbow thought she was entitled by her looks to at least Colonel Tremayne or Lord George. Miss Langham, though not exactly discontented with Lord George's title and conversation, had set her heart upon getting an authentic inventory of Colonel Tremayne's diamonds, and an authentic history of his travels. Lord George felt that he had already got nearly all there was to be got out of Miss Langham, and desired to explore the mental

resources of the female apostle of the Occult. Mrs. Bent alone of the party was neither pleased nor displeased, for she was rarely at a loss for a topic, and her intonation was such that it was impossible she could fail of having an audience. The three men wanted partners, and felt ill-used. Bauer was afflicted not so much at his neighbourhood to Mrs. Bent, as because he had anxieties of his own; and being, like many of his class, sordidly superstitious, he was at this moment profoundly impressed by the presence of thirteen at table, which he had discovered immediately.

"Ach!" he cried, as they sat down, in a despondent tone to his neighbour, "Ach Himmel! we are thirteen! It is treadful!"

"Personally," said Mrs. Bent, "I am indifferent to the fact, though I recognise the existence of a subtle wisdom and truth in this so-called superstition about the number thirteen."

"You think him a superstition? Therefore a thing not to be feared?"

"A superstition in *that* sense? Oh, by no means. I said a so-called superstition. It is indeed one of those truths which have reached us by unbroken tradition from times when the intelligence of mankind was greater than

it now is, and their vision more acute. There are many such profound axioms which we may still reverence as holy things, without profanely inquiring into their causes—such as that to spill salt is unlucky, or to see a single magpie. I said I was indifferent, because my creed teaches me supreme indifference to the good and bad things of this sublunary sphere, to its favours and to its crosses—— How singularly delicious this salmon is, by-the-bye, fresh from the stream, and with the curd still——"

"Madam, I ask, do you believe that death will really come to one of a party of thirteen within——"

"Within a year? Oh yes, certainly! Why not? Death, or else some great misfortune."

"Ach, Himmel! How derrible!"

In the little pause at the beginning of dinner, this dialogue, uttered in the somewhat loud tone habitual to both the interlocutors, fell upon the company as something of a damper. Presently, however, the topic afforded some little subject for general talk.

Miss Langham informed the company that such beliefs had wholly died out in her country, with the spread of education and the general advance of civilisation.

Lord George agreed with her that her people showed their usual common-sense in laughing at such foolish things. He himself was quite strong-minded, and had got the better of all such prejudices; except, indeed, that he never failed to take off his hat to a single magpie.

"We have no magpies in my country," said the young lady.

"That, of course, saves you from having to bow to them," said his lordship. "It is a distinct derogation of the intelligence to have to do it."

It was the general opinion, expressed in undertones, that these superstitions were absurd enough, but that one must respect them as being possibly the prejudices of one's neighbours, and, if one could help it, neither spill salt nor ask thirteen people to dinner.

The Professor was beginning an account of some superstitions of an exceptional kind in the more distant and recondite regions of the earth, when the conversation turned to the cause of their company numbering thirteen—the absence of the eminent novelist. He was, in fact, expecting the arrival at his moor of another eminent novelist.

"Eminent novelists seem plentiful in England," said Miss Langham.

"It is the country of novelists," observed her companion, "and the period of novelists. I believe our descendants will talk of the age of Victoria as the age of good novels."

"We rather laugh in my country at your notion of good novels; we think we have improved on the model."

"You laugh; but you read, and you pirate us."

"Seriously, do you not think," asked Miss Langham, "that we are already an immeasurable way ahead of you?"

Lord George was a dilettante literary critic on one or two of the foremost literary papers. He wrote well, discerningly, and honestly. It was the one iron which this rich and otherwise idle gentleman had in the fire of the work-a-day world, and as the most cynical and light-hearted person will bear no trifling with the serious business of his life, so Lord George would endure no jesting with literary matters.

Accordingly he thought fit to argue the matter out with the young lady, and took infinite pains to prove to her that in novel-writing all is good that attracts right-

thinking people; and that a right-thinking person may at one moment be in the humour to like a good sensation story, at another time a story of domestic life; at another, a novel of adventure, or a purely humorous one, or a purely sentimental one. The one evil, in judging of such things, said his lordship, was narrowness and cliquism, and intolerance of good work in as many directions as possible.

The argument, happening at a moment when there was something of a social hitch and a lull of talk, was caught up and re-echoed along the side of the table, through General Stone, till it reached Tremayne and the Countess, between whom there had been at starting a little awkwardness.

"How do you like your novels?" asked Tremayne of his neighbour.

"Oh," said the Countess, "I am like all women, I can read any novel with a story, and a good many without one—and you?"

"I fancy that novels mean, or have meant, a good deal more to me than to most people. Imagine a man living utterly apart from all that has ever made life pleasant to him. Imagine this going on for weeks, months, and years, till at last his memory of everything

of the past life gets almost blotted out, and he can hardly call up any image but of dark faces, treachery, cruelty everywhere, discomfort, dirt, misery, dreary barren mountains, intense sun and heat, or rain, snow, wind, and fearful cold; one gets at last hardly to think; except in the rough, abominable dialect of the hill-men, one hates everybody and everything round one, one hardly believes there is anything better anywhere. One would give all one possesses for an hour's talk in one's own tongue with a friend; one would welcome an enemy if he had a white face and talked English! Then, some day, a novel comes into the poor man's hands, he opens it, and in one moment he is in England. Is there any magic in the world like that? Imagine a man got so low as I have said, and suddenly finding himself in the company of George Meredith, or of James Payn, or Walter Besant, or of Henry James, or Howells, and hearing them talk the dear old language to you, so pleasantly and so well!"

"But when the book is finished you feel drearier than ever?"

"By no means; it is an oasis in the desert of one's dull life, and one goes on refreshed. Besides, I always took care not to finish in a

hurry; I spun out my books, I dwelt on each page, and then when I had done, I turned back to page one and began all over again. If ever I met an author whose book I have liked, I always feel as if I knew him already, and hardly required an introduction."

"What a critic you ought to be of novels!"

"I am afraid not—of the books, at least; but of the authors I think I am. I judge them as I do my friends, and if they are not thoroughly good fellows and likable, and people who know about the sort of people I do, I don't care to make their acquaintance. Is your idea of novels anything like mine?"

"Yes," said the Countess gravely, "I think very much as you do; it is going outside of one's own life when it gets unbearably dull, or unbearably hateful, into another and a livelier one. Perhaps you will think it childish, but I like to find myself in a world where the good and patient people get righted at last, and the villain gets punished."

"I see. I thought I was original, and I am glad to know you think as I do."

It was an approach to an approval of her, and she liked it from him.

"I suppose," she said, laughing a little, "being so long so far off, you got at last to think that there were no such things as dreariness, and cruelty, and treachery in Europe?"

He looked into her face scanningly, and before he answered her, glanced across the table to where Bauer sat, near the farther end.

"Whatever I may have thought out there, I have found out since I came back that there is no monopoly of cruelty or treachery in Asia."

"You have found that out so soon?" she asked; "in one month?"

"In six weeks."

"On the Continent? While you were travelling?"

"Exactly. Are you chaffing me?"

"You know I am not. I am being curious."

He looked at her inquiringly, puzzled; and her brows too were knitted in speculation. That she was honestly anxious to discover the truth about something was obvious enough to him—but what? He tried to imagine himself at her standpoint, and to scan the whole horizon of her outlook —in vain.

"Tell me what you are curious about," he said at last in desperation, but without much expectation of a plain answer from so sophisticated a personage.

She only smiled rather distrustfully.

"The fact is, you are *not* curious!" he said, laughing.

"Then I am not a woman."

"Oh!" he said, disappointed, "I see. A general kind of curiosity. That is nothing. I thought it might be a curiosity about something in particular."

"And if it had been?" she hazarded.

"If it had been, I could perhaps not have resisted gratifying it."

"But not being about something in particular, you would not run the risk? Pray what is the risk?"

"The risk of being misunderstood, and perhaps laughed at."

"By whom? By me?"

"Of course, by you."

"You mean, I suppose, that having a secret, and being in an expansive mood, you are dying to find some sympathetic person to whom to confide it."

"I in an expansive mood? Nothing of the kind, Countess. Have you forgotten me

so entirely as to credit me with expansive moods?"

"There are some happy secrets," said the Countess, in her most mocking manner, "so delightful, so overpoweringly delightful, that one's own custody of them is not enough, one can only enjoy them thoroughly after they have been imparted. There are some secrets *à deux*, and some *à tout le monde*, and this one, I imagine, is of that kind."

There was little measure in her bitterness, and her disappointment, and her anger; Colonel Tremayne did not guess what it was all about, and she went on:

"Do you know, Colonel Tremayne, that it strikes me after all that a woman is not a right person to confide even such secrets as yours to? Trust our natural sharpness to find them out ourselves. The people to tell them to are men — your friends in the smoking-room of your club—perhaps they will envy you!"

This tirade was to Colonel Tremayne absolutely unintelligible; it was so rapidly delivered and was so utterly astonishing to him, that it deprived him for the moment of all power of speech. It deprived him too, when he did speak, of the recollection that

he had not as yet addressed the Countess except with extreme distance and deference. He went so far as almost to lecture her.

"Nancy! can it be *you* who are speaking to me like that? Have things been so hard to you that you can be so unlike your old self?"

She was shamed a little by his reproof, and her eyes fell, but she still felt grievously wounded.

"Do you know what secret it is you speak of so lightly?"

"Certainly I do. Who does not?"

"What! you do, and everybody does? Impossible! No one at least can know why I spent six weeks on the Continent."

"That," said Nancy, pretending a cynical indifference again, "is what I told you I had a woman's curiosity about."

"Why!" he cried, "that *is* the secret."

"Surely not? Anyhow, that is what I had a passing and purely womanly curiosity about."

"I will take you at your word, then," said Tremayne very gravely, "and as this is the last chance I shall probably ever have of speaking to you, I will tell you this secret, which you say I should confide to my club friends."

"And I am never, *never* to divulge it?"

He overlooked her irony, as a thing for the moment quite beyond his comprehension, and spoke on. The buzz of dinner-table talk was all round them, he was sitting at the side of the table and she at the bottom, so that as he spoke his lips were not far from her ear. He spoke quickly and eagerly to her. She looked straight before her, so composing her face that the deep impression made on her by his words, wholly unexpected as they were by her, was not evident to the other guests.

"Nancy, you might have guessed long ago what drove me into exile. It was the news of your marriage that decided me to stay away so long from the world. I loved you. You knew it once, and you may know it again now, if it interests you at all to hear it said. When I heard that you were free, I came back. I had heard of the unhappiness of your life; I knew that you and your father were in the power of that man"—he looked towards Bauer—"I could guess the history of your marriage, and how it had come about. The secret of my staying so many weeks on the Continent, before coming home to my friends, was that I thought I saw my way to

free you from these troubles, from the plots that had surrounded you. Where you had been, I went. I learnt all about you, every event of your past life. At last I came here, and I find you, Nancy, more beautiful, more delightful, more lovable, than my wildest dreams of you, and you—you are bitter to me, cold and heartless——"

Her face had grown paler and paler as he spoke. He could see that it was a very great effort to her to retain upon it the requisite look and smile of indifference. She drew her breath more quickly, and he saw the slight trembling of the lips while the mouth still tried to wear its careless smile; but he augured no good from these symptoms, and he went on, hopeless of moving her, not pleading his love but telling her of it; and she understood that it was so, and was deeply touched.

"This," she thought, "was part of the true manliness that was always in him, not to hold back from me the fact of his loving me, or meanly to pretend indifference, as I, with a mean, weak, womanly hypocrisy, am at this moment pretending to him;" and she was all but won.

She turned her face for an instant upon

her lover, and she was softened, but he saw nothing of it, and as she turned away again he went on:

"I tell you all this, not as one who loves you and who can ever expect to persuade you to love me in return; for I have proof enough that you cannot, and I know it is folly for a man to think he can *persuade* a woman to love him."

"Is it?" said Nancy to herself, and the thought would come to her: "If he were not half-hearted he would try."

"I tell you this story not as a lover, not as I hoped I might tell it you, but as a friend."

"I guessed it," she thought bitterly; "it is his loyalty, not his love, that is speaking to me. Half his heart is estranged from me."

She was irrational about it all, deplorably irrational, for she would have all or nothing of a love which must be at the height of her own absorbing passion to satisfy her.

"What I have done will bear its fruit for your good. Perhaps it is selfish of me to wish you to know that I had some hand in helping you. At least accept what I have

done as from a friend, and you will, perhaps, hereafter look back upon the thought of me as a faithful friend only, and no longer bitterly."

He paused and she could not speak. She looked at him again for a moment. If he could but have read the story of her soul, as it was told at that instant in her face, if she could have summoned courage to confess to him the one jealous, torturing doubt that rankled like a poisoned weapon in her heart, then all would have been well; and this story of the love, the parting, and the long estrangement of these two persons would have ended here on this page with their reconciliation.

Looking on her face, hè saw, or thought he saw, a softened look on her mouth, but he saw too the cloud that still hung on her brow: he read her still the same, inexorable for him.

On her side, she felt the impending parting to be growing inevitably near. She trembled nervously at her helplessness while the precious moments were slipping one by one away; the parting after which nothing could be explained, nothing of her doubts made clear, and the cruel wound to her

peace could now never in all her after life be healed. She tried hard to speak but in her nervousness she could not form the words, nor could her mind even frame a question which should bring the answer she wanted, without betraying her weakness and her shame.

She waited for an inspiration; he imputed her silence to her coldness, and was silent too.

The dinner had arrived at that critical point, when the host, if there be no official hostess, grows uneasy about the departure of the ladies, when the ladies have drawn on their gloves, collected their fans and handkerchiefs, and, in the prospect of the coming move, are careful to allow the most interesting conversation to drop.

It was for the Countess at the bottom of the table to make the first move. The silence, and the looks directed towards her, warned her that she must rise; she did so, and their parting was felt by both to be a parting for ever.

CHAPTER XV.

As soon as the men were left to themselves over their wine, coffee, liqueurs, and cigars, Herr von Bauer became the life and soul of the party. Never had he been so brilliant and yet so sympathetic; the soul of Sir John rejoiced exceedingly over the conversational prowess of his guest at this critical period of the repast, for we men, and especially we men who are at times hosts, know that it is a critical period when we are left suddenly to our own resources, and that if the current of talk be not straightway made to run briskly and brightly, it may easily stagnate into a very intolerable dulness.

Sir John therefore witnessed Bauer's dashing attack upon the stronghold of silence and gloom—ever present where our countrymen foregather—with the gratitude with which a

general sees a soldier volunteer for the forlorn hope.

It was not, indeed, that Von Bauer spoke so much with any great force of eloquence, as that he was voluble and...brave to a striking degree in the use of a language of which he was nearly, but not wholly master.

It was remarked by Tremayne and Vivash, who were watching him, that he had dropped his German accent altogether, and that he now spoke very fluent English, of a non-descript kind indeed, but with hardly a token of its being a foreign tongue beyond the occasional slight improvement upon a native idiom, and now and then a *z* put for a *th*, that *crux* of all English-speaking foreigners.

He chose a great subject to speak on, no less a theme than the international politics of the world — of the European world; the destinies of the nations; the antipathies, sympathies, and jealousies of rulers, crowned or otherwise, whose differences and rumours of differences are to the world at large as when the sky is overcast, and the thunder of Jove rattles through the firmament.

He showed himself to be a man who could assume a very lofty attitude, was swayed by no paltry national prejudices, who weighed the shortcomings of the nations in equal moral balance, and judged them inexorably. He spoke in a large manner, generalising indeed not lightly, but as one who abounds in full and accurate information; not obscuring his great subject by any affected brevity or conciseness, rather indeed seeming to prefer diffuseness to the ambiguity arising from undue concentration; not otherwise than as if he, in his own person, were an embodiment of the entities of all past and present "own correspondents."

But it was the chief charm of his speaking that he did what the boldest writer on such topics dare not do too often; he supported his assertions and accompanied his generalisations by the most apposite, authentic, and pungent of personal anecdotes. The charmed circle of Courts and the innermost recesses of foreign Chanceries had evidently been forced to surrender to him their most hidden secrets.

Not that he condescended to recount these anecdotes in any gossiping or scandalous spirit:

"Far be it, my dear friends, from me—from me, Friedrich von Bauer—to pander to any low curiosity for such details, if you had it; bah! are we not English gentlemen, above the *tripotage* of the backstairs, above the tittle-tattle of the street-corner? but also we are men of the world, philosophers of social life, who know that without the concrete the abstract is null and foid. For us, who follow *la Haute Finance*—for that is my profession, gentlemen—it is not enough to know the tendencies of the times, the temper of the nations, the advance of the great waves of thought; we must know the characters of zoze who are in the van of the onward, in the rear of the retrograde movements. Hence these little piquant anecdotes, which I see provoke you to a smile, to the student of human nature they are the key to everything. But they have a higher import. You, Professor Dredge, can construct a grand theory of physiology, with which Europe shall resound; but upon what do you found it? The humble drudgery of the laboratory. You, Sir John, have constructed a colossal fortune; your hand has swayed an army of workmen, and you own wealth, palaces, territories that vie with zoze of many Euro-

pean principalities—yes, you are one of the great industrial Princes of England, but you are not above considering the construction of a furnace or the composition of an iron ore!"

Sir John and the Professor smiled at the flattery, and bowed.

"So with me. As manufactures to you, Sir John; as science to you, Professor, so is *la Haute Finance*, financial operations on the grand national scale, to me. There is no mystery in it, nothing petty, nothing mean, nothing low. It is a grand study, in which we the Rothschilds, and the—yes, I will say, and the Bauers—for I must not act the over-modest—play a game on the great chess-board of Europe, with kings, and councillors, and great generals, and great orators, and great ecclesiastics for our pieces, battles and revolutions for ze moves."

"If I were to interrupt now with the story of the three cards up his sleeve at Baden," suggested Lord George, in his cousin's ear.

"Hush, for heaven's sake! You'll ruin everything."

"And the results of winning the game," went on Von Bauer, "you know them, my friends, you know them! Fortune—fortune is in the venture, wealth in the winning,

wealth beyond ze treams of avarice! That have I won, and still I advance."

His great flow of talk, its force, its vehemence, its strangeness, and a real interest about it, to say nothing of its being a mode of rhetoric so remarkably uncommon over the "wine and walnuts" of an English dinner, greatly impressed Sir John's guests, and there was something almost amounting to a murmur of applause among them as he paused. The two cousins themselves were taken aback by the man's sufficiency.

"I never expected anything so strong as this," muttered Lord George under his breath, amid the general murmurs of approval among the guests. "What is his object, do you suppose? What is he driving at?"

"It's clear enough," said Tremayne: "the rascal is expecting a row, and trying to make his position strong here. He little guesses the surprise I have for him! Listen to him again!"

"You may wonder, gentlemen, that in the midst of a career so—shall I say it? yes!—so colossally successful as my own, I have not permitted my many services to the State to be recognised by the lustre of ennoble-

ment. My friends on the Continent have repeatedly expressed astonishment at the fact. The cause of it, gentlemen, is here!" —he pointed with one finger to his own bosom, a little to the left of the single blazing stud in his shirt-front—"is here! is my Pride! Yes! born as I was, the younger son of one of the most illustrious and oldest families of Pomerania—the Von Bauers—our estates confine with those of an eminent modern statesman, whom I need not more closely designate——"

"By heavens!" muttered Lord George, "will they stand this?"

"Often has my gray-haired father, in company with the illustrious friend and neighbour (whom I refrain from naming), asked his advice, in my boyhood, as to my future career. My father was hesitating between the military and the diplomatic *carrières*."

"His father is a Jew horse-dealer in Southern Podolia," Colonel Tremayne observed under his breath.

"To the Count von Bauer, my father, the illustrious friend would reply, with the fire and animation that have made their mark in a hundred council-chambers: 'Not so, Count! Friedrich has a soul above the

manœuvring of a brigade, the inditing of a protocol, or an appeal to the passions of a senate-house. I perceive in him such a far-seeing genius for finance, as in the coming crisis of her fortunes will to his country be invaluable. Let your son be a financier, Count von Bauer. Let him mingle with the great ones of the earth, but not be of them. Let him despise the empty honours which kings and princes can bestow, satisfied to act the part of Providence to the sovereigns and the peoples, and to replenish, in the time of exhaustion, the national exchequers emptied by war or by famine. His will be a worthy and a glorious *carrière!*'

"That was the advice given to my father by the most eminent of his compatriots, and I well remember that as he spoke, he quoted a passage from one of your English poets. 'Let Friedrich,' he said, 'be content to be of those——

Who read zeir history in zeir country's eyes.'"

Bauer's peroration had something of a drop in it; but the anti-climax was not enough of one to mar the good effect of his previous rhetoric.

"This, gentlemen," he said, resuming in a

dignified tone, and placing his right hand on the region which he had already more than once had occasion to tap at and point to, "this, gentlemen, is the advice I adopted, this is the *carrière* I have followed."

After this remarkable display of oratory, Sir John and his guests felt that commonplace talk would sound but tamely. They rose from the table, silent, impressed, overpowered, and joined the ladies in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XVI.

LORD GEORGE VIVASH was right about the Countess, and his chance of finding her disengaged. So soon as the men had reached the drawing-room, they made their way, as if by common accord, to her chair, and presently all of them but her father and Bauer had surrounded her, and she was entertaining them in her usual light and easy manner; a word to one, a smile to another, and a cheerful nod to a third. Colonel Tremayne himself was in the circle, and came in for his share of her notice, but for no more than a share.

Mrs. Bent, sitting near, marvelled at and despised the frivolity of men, young or middle-aged, and after watching the Countess for a moment, turned quite round in her seat, and faced another way.

Mrs. Longbow and Miss Langham watched

too, as critically, but with envy and wonder, rather than contempt. Were not they as pretty, as well-dressed, as clever — and younger? Then what was it? Where was the attraction?

Yes, that is the question; in what does the charm lie? Is it some magnetic attraction that the dull five senses fail to convey? Is it some subtle spiritual sense that is reached, finer than any that we recognise? Some few men, and some few women, could make something of an answer, but when the full answer can be given, perhaps the world will be a much older, as well as a much wiser world.

Lord George presently retreated from the group, and spoke to his sister.

"I am out of my reckoning, Di; what is her object? I thought I knew the ins and outs of a woman's mind by this time. What the deuce is she driving at?"

Lady Diana raised her eyes for a minute to her brother's; her face expressed neither scorn, pity, nor wonder, but a something that was compounded of each of these sentiments. She made no answer to his remark, and averting her gaze, again contemplated the Countess and the group who stood around her.

"Do you imagine you can read the puzzle?" he asked, a little contemptuously.

"Certainly I do, but then I am not a man of the world, who has read amiss the characters of twenty women, supposes he knows them all by heart, and thinks he can tell all about the twenty-first!"

"Ha!" said her brother good-humouredly, "I believe you mean me. As if I ever presumed to know any woman's character by heart—except, of course, my own sister's!"

"That, of course, is transparency itself. Oh, George, you dreadful old muff!" she said, with a sudden change of manner.

"Well! What is it?"

"Don't you see?"

"No. I don't mind confessing I don't see. He is in love with her, I know that. Of course she does not care a bit for him—that is clear enough too, I suppose."

"Indeed!"

"Why, do you really mean that——"

Lady Diana nodded emphatically: "Over head and ears!"

"Then why, in Heaven's name, does she not say 'Yes,' and have done with it?"

Lady Diana seemed as if she were about to condescend to an explanation, but apparently

finding the task beyond her powers of exposition, she again relapsed into silence.

"Well, Diana, if you know where the hitch is, it strikes me the kindest thing you can do is to tell Jim."

Lady Diana looked at her brother as she might have looked at some new and very curious specimen of butterfly or beetle.

"Of course," he went on, having got no answer, "that is the obvious, common-sense view of the matter. Put him up to what you know, and let him go in and win!"

His sister's brow contracted slightly, and she looked puzzled. Lord George conceived that she only wanted a little encouragement to follow the course he was suggesting.

"Let him *have the office*, Di," cried Lord George heartily. "Give him the *straight tip*, and trust to Jim to *make the running*."

"George, would you please not talk that horrid racing slang to me!"

"Look here!" cried Lord George, "Jim is coming to us; Nancy has been too rough on him again, I suppose. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do, Di; I'll slip away, leave you and Jim together, and you shall tell him this mysterious secret which you don't seem inclined to trust me with."

At this juncture of affairs, Lord George was quite taken aback by the sudden energy displayed by his sister.

She laid her hand on his arm lightly and airily, as no doubt appeared to any casual observer of the movement, but with a restraining force, not to say a painful grip, that his lordship knew must betoken some more than common purpose.

"Well," he said, "what is it? Am I not to go?"

"George, if you venture to stir from that chair till I tell you you may, I will never speak to you again."

"Oh, you won't? Very well, then, I'd better sit still;" and he settled himself comfortably back in his chair.

He looked at the group again.

"Jim does not seem to find it so easy to get away. Look, she is evidently saying something very agreeable to him for a change. It must be something particularly civil, for the others look quite sad, poor fellows! What a horrid flirt the woman—— I mean, how she conforms to——"

Again Lady Diana did not answer him; her hand, though, still retained its hold of his

arm, as if she wanted to make quite certain of his presence by her side.

"What the deuce is she looking at us for, Di? I know she is one of those wonderful women who talk themselves as much as any ten ordinary women, and yet can hear what everyone else says within five yards of them. But why should she care to watch us? What can it matter to her what you and I are saying or doing?"

"Dear George," asked his sister in a gentle tone of interest in him, "are you quite well to-night? You look pale. You have not been overworking your brain lately, have you? or smoking too much? Are you often taken like this, dear?"

He laughed. "Pray go on! I don't mind it. I suppose I shall know what it all means, some day."

"Do you really think you will? Ah! here comes Jim!"

When Colonel Tremayne did join them, his cousin's curiosity was not any nearer being gratified than before, for Lady Diana did not give him time to say a single word about the Countess or his own affairs.

"Jim," she began at once, "I have been

thinking it a thousand pities you don't know that charming little Mrs. Longbow; you will like her immensely, and she is dying to make your acquaintance. She is so deeply interested in Bel—— in that place you lived in."

"Is she really?" said Colonel Tremayne, "how odd of her!"

"Isn't it? Would you not like to know her?"

Tremayne hesitated.

"My dear Jim, she is perfectly delightful, and my particular friend, and George's."

"Oh!" remonstrated her brother.

"Well, George, you know her very well. Don't you remember you met her at the Opera last year? And I want you," she went on with great rapidity and animation, "I want you to take Jim at once, and introduce him—at once, George, you know—before anyone comes and talks to her. Do let him, Jim, to oblige me; she is so very nice, and very pretty, as you can see for yourself."

Lady Diana was so urgent on the point that the men could only do as she bid them.

"And, George," she said, as they were going, "when you have introduced Jim, come back here, for I have just remembered

something very particular I have to say to you."

She called to them once more before they had gone on their way:

"And, by-the-bye, Jim, you need not talk too much about India, you know—at first."

"No? Why, I thought that was her strong point."

"So it is, but—in fact, she is rather what Mrs. Bent would call frivolous—rather a flirt, you understand."

"Oh!" cried Lord George, "the horrid word, Di, don't use it;" and he hurried off his cousin, and presented him to Mrs. Longbow.

As Lady Diana sat back in her low chair, her face wore an expression of calm satisfaction. She looked at the Countess, and noticed that she had turned her back upon her, and was now fully occupied with the group of men by whom she was surrounded. She glanced at Mrs. Longbow, and saw that that pretty and interesting personage was happily engaged in earnest small-talk with her cousin. Lord George had obeyed his orders, and was on his way back to his sister. She welcomed him with a nod and smile of approval.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, George?"

"Well, what had you got to say to me?"

"I? Did you really think I had anything at all to say to you?"

"You happened distinctly to say that you had, that's all."

"Decidedly I was wrong about you, George. I flattered you just now. You can't be at your twenty-first woman's character yet. Oh, dear me, no! I have got nothing to say to you, but you can sit here and make yourself agreeable, if you like, or you can go and help Edward to flirt with the Countess."

Lord George settled himself by his sister's side.

"You don't seem to mind it, Di."

"Mind it! No, I should think not, indeed. If you only knew what a miracle of steadiness Edward is. Besides, it is so very good for him. It soothes him, poor fellow! He has been so busy all day with that question of the persecution of the Jews in Southern Russia.. Of course, it relaxes his mind to talk to a nice and pretty woman. He has been writing a two-column letter to the *Times* all the afternoon, while Jim and I were shooting together."

"Good heavens! I thought he had his hands full. Is he going to take the Russian Jews up now?"

"Well, no; or rather, only indirectly. It is rather the other way, in fact. Edward is always so original in his ideas. His view is that the persecution of the Jews by the peasants, with the outrages upon them, and all that, is, after all, only a form of misdirected patriotism; that it is a protest against a despotic Government, and, instead of being anything dreadful at all, is, as Edward says, the righteous and holy uprising of an oppressed nationality."

"That is rather leaving the unfortunate Jews out of it, is it not?"

"That is Edward's view, George."

"But how comes he to have a view at all? He has not been in Southern Russia, has he?"

"No, but he has travelled all through Finland on a sledge with fourteen reindeer; and when a man has travelled all through Finland with——"

"Of course he gets to know all about the Jews in Southern Russia."

"When a man of Edward's calibre, George, of Edward's brilliant powers, travels *in* Russia,

he knows *about* Russia. You seem to forget that Finland is part of Russia."

"To be sure I did, Di. How one forgets one's geography! Of course that explains everything."

Lady Diana did not like any approach to levity on the sacred subject of her husband and his "views," and she looked so sternly upon her brother that he thought it prudent to turn the conversation into a safer direction.

"Here he comes! He has evidently done his relaxation for to-day. Well, Edward," he went on, as Mr. Follett joined them, "isn't she delightful?"

"Who?"

"The siren you have just left, of course."

"A most charming person, certainly, and with sounder views on political economy and the tenure of land than any woman I ever met with."

"Now, Edward!" cried his wife, "that I really cannot stand. No woman knows anything about political economy or land tenure; they only pretend."

Lord George laughed: "Do you mean to persuade us, Edward, that the Countess has been talking political economy to you?"

"Not exactly; but she most thoroughly

understood and appreciated my exposition of the doctrine of 'unearned increment' in the case of the Russian land-owners."

"Clever woman!" observed Lord George. "Diana and I had no idea you were being so edifying to each other."

"She is a clever woman," said Mr. Follett, "and has evidently got much from living in the society of Herr von Bauer. Von Bauer is certainly one of the most interesting and remarkable men in Europe. I wish you could have heard him after dinner, Di. A most eloquent display. I only wonder I never heard of him before."

"You could hear a good deal about him on the Continent, if you asked the right people," said Lord George.

"No doubt. I want to develop my views about the Jews in Southern Russia to him, and get at his views."

"He could say a good deal on that particular subject, if Jim Tremayne is right."

"Colonel Tremayne knows him?"

"Oh, remarkably well! No man better."

"I wonder if I could venture to ask Herr von Bauer a question about a company I am interested in—'The Moscow Co-operative Land Company.'"

"Limited?"

"No; but there is no risk. You hold the land, you know."

"Who *co-operates?*"

"Everyone in Russia, from the patrician to the peasant. All the land over a vast district is to be acquired by the Company. All the complicated tenure and rights of the great land-owner, the village commune and the poor *moujic*, the causes of innumerable heart-burnings and great danger to the State, are to be obliterated by a stroke of the pen. Fresh capital is to be poured into the country by the foreign shareholders; the land at once yields tenfold; exports of agricultural produce increase; imports are poured into the country in an augmenting ratio; the revenue benefits; taxes are lightened; paper money is redeemed; the *moujic* buys a watch-chain and wears a shirt."

"You talk like a prospectus, Edward."

"I have just been studying the prospectus."

"How about the nobles?" asked his lordship.

"The nobles become simple shareholders in a most profitable concern; their income is trebled and their pretensions abated, for necessarily as shareholders they are levelled down to the condition of their former serfs, who are

shareholders as well—or rather, the serfs are raised to the status of the noble. It is a universal brotherhood, the *moujic* and the millionaire shake hands."

"And the Nihilists, what do they say to it?"

"They are buying shares rapidly, by all I hear. The applications for shares are, by last accounts, quite extraordinary in all classes of the community. The Czar approves the scheme: The Czarina has applied in person for fifty ten-pound shares."

"That is not much for an empress."

"The Russian Civil List is small. Her Majesty contents herself for the moment with fifty ten-pound shares."

"At a discount?"

"No, at a premium of two-and-a-half."

"And you are a holder?"

"Not yet; in fact, the prospectus has only come into my hands within the last day or two."

"You seem to have studied it carefully."

"I have; and I am quoting from it. There is a grandeur of conception about the scheme that captivated me at once; a simplicity too, a sort of obviousness, and a naïveté."

"There seems to be all that about it."

"I am inclined to take two or three thousand shares, if they are still to be got."

"Never fear."

"And I am only waiting to get Herr von Bauer's opinion. I should set the greatest store by it."

"He will give it to you freely, my dear fellow. Probably he was himself the promoter. I fancy I trace his masterly hand in the prospectus."

"So, I think, do I," said Mr. Follett. "I will ask him to-night, and apply for shares by to-morrow's post."

"Edward!" cried Lady Diana, with great earnestness, "I am not one of the women who know anything about political economy; but will you, just for once, take my advice?"

Mr. Follett regarded his wife with the smile of conscious but kindly superiority.

"Really, Diana!"

"I don't ask you to follow my advice in the matter; but I do ask you this one little favour, Edward—don't write for shares by to-morrow's post."

"And lose a whole day?"

"I ask you as a particular favour."

Mr. Follett was a good-natured man, who

was fond and proud of his pretty wife; but he hesitated a moment.

"The premium may go up," he said. He looked at his brother-in-law's face.

"Say 'yes,'" said the latter; "I am sure you won't be sorry afterwards."

"Very well, Di," he said, with a sigh of resignation; "you know you always get your own way. I won't write till the day after to-morrow."

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR JOHN SMITH was one of those hosts who mitigate, in the interests of their guests and of their guests' digestions, the traditional severity of that magnificent repast, a Scotch breakfast.

He made breakfast at Glen Cruachan an early meal, because of the great business of the day that was to be done afterwards, and a varied and substantial one, because of the hard walking which that business involved. The barbaric profusion and the astounding and redundant variety of the true Scotch breakfast had been refined down, in his hands and his *chef's*, to almost the modest proportions of a morning meal south of the Tweed. By ten, as we have already seen, it was over, except for very late risers, and the guests were beginning to make their preparations for the moors.

On the morning after the events recorded in the last chapter most of the guests were keen for the day's sport, and there were no late risers.

It had been arranged, to the disappointment of all the ladies, that lunch that day could not be held in the beautiful valley where it had taken place the day before, for the morning had opened unpromisingly. There was, in fact, a driving mist; the ominous word, rain, had not been mentioned by anyone, but the falling and drifting moisture was enough to make waterproofs a necessity and umbrellas a comfort.

The men had indeed taken counsel with the keepers and gillies, and these shrewd natives—cunning observers of the weather of the western coast of Scotland—had declared unanimously: first, that such a thing as rain or even mist had never even been heard of in Scotland in the latter part of August; secondly, that the present meteorological phenomenon was not mist at all, but a kind of a thickening of the air; thirdly, and this opinion was delivered oracularly by the head-keeper and approved by the rest, that this same *thickening* was "just the pride of the morning," and betokened an over-

poweringly bright and sunny day. Notwithstanding all which, Sir John Smith had decided against any picknicking in Glen Albyn. The men would therefore shoot over a small extent of moor reserved for such days, near the house, and come back to Glen Cruachan for lunch.

"What would the ladies do?" asked Sir John. "Would they brave the rain—he should say, the mist?"

There was a pause, Miss Langham broke it.

"I don't mind getting wet," she said, "for once."

"Nor I," cried Mrs. Longbow.

"Nor I," said Lady Diana, "if I had not so many letters to write. Do you shoot, dear Mrs. Longbow?"

"I have shot," said Mrs. Longbow, "but——"

"I see you are like me; I have shot a good deal too. I say nothing about hitting! I should be quite disturbed if I ever brought the poor birds down. I wish you would take my gun."

"Thanks so very much, Lady Diana; how *very* kind of you!"

"And my cousin, Colonel Tremayne, will

take care of you ; won't you, Jim, as you did of me yesterday?"

Tremayne bowed; he had not meant to shoot, he said, for at twelve—post-time—he must be in to receive a very important letter, and perhaps to act upon it, but if he might escort Mrs. Longbow till, say, eleven, and then leave her in charge of some other of the party, he would be delighted.

Mrs. Longbow lost no time in thanking him, and accepting the offer.

So it was settled that Miss Langham was to walk with the shooters, and that Mrs. Longbow was to carry a gun, and be in charge of Colonel Tremayne. The other ladies would stay in ; so would Lord George, who hated getting wet, and had letters to write. Herr von Bauer would go on the moors. He was a keen sportsman, he told the guests, and he certainly let his gun off freely and often, and if he hit seldom, it was, no doubt, as he explained, because he had got "his eye out" for smaller game, by shooting elk and bear at the shooting parties of the Emperor of Austria.

Mr. Follett was not much of a sportsman either, but he was very anxious to have

some talk with Von Bauer, and he would go out too.

From a great recessed bow-window in the gallery of the hall, those who remained watched the start of the shooting party. The moor began on this side of the house within fifty yards of it; hereabouts the grouse had not yet been disturbed, and operations commenced immediately.

It was a pretty sight, full of life and movement. Though the day was sunless, the air was yet full of light, and the mist, blown here and there fantastically by the wind-gusts into wreaths and drifts, showed as white as snow, now wholly blocking the view of the hills, and again cleft in places and laying bare the dark and jagged rock-peaks or the red-flowered heather.

The shooters, the keepers, the loaders, and the gillies, spreading out fan-wise at once, formed themselves into a line more than a hundred yards in length, and advanced abreast across the knee-deep heather. In the rear came the ponies to carry game, led by kilted boys; in front of the shooters, four red and white setters, ranging to right and left in obedience to the silent signals of the keepers, quartered the space before the line, gal-

loping joyously and swiftly over the rugged ground.

Presently a dog pointed, the nearest keeper raised his hand, the other dogs dropped in their places, the line advanced more cautiously, and in another moment a covey of grouse rose whirring from the heather, suddenly, simultaneously, one here, one there, along the whole line. There was a volley from the guns, most of the men firing right and left; half-a-dozen birds fell. The line paused for an instant; the men reached for their second guns.

"Jim did not shoot that time," observed Lady Diana; "he was watching Mrs. Longbow on his left."

"Admiration?" asked Lord George.

"Or was it terror?" suggested the Countess von Schimmerling, smiling sweetly upon Lady Diana Follett.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ladies had retired to their rooms to write their letters. Lord George elected to remain in the hall to write his; it was cheerful there, and warm, for a wood fire burned between the brazen dogs on the great hearth-place, and counteracted the damp and chilliness of the mist.

His lordship's letters did not seem to be of any particular importance. He did not appear inclined to settle down to his work, but paced up and down the room as if he were thinking out some knotty point. He took up a morning paper, and laid it down again almost immediately. He lit a cigarette, smoked it rapidly, threw the end into the fire, and stood for a moment holding out the palms of his hands to the pleasant flickering blaze.

So standing, he heard the rustle of a dress on the stairs. He did not turn his head.

He even affected to be unconscious of the light gliding step which presently approached him. He carried the comedy so far as to hum an air softly to himself, an air from an Italian opera.

It was the Countess who had come into his presence, as he had guessed. She was the first to speak, and her tone was bantering.

"How well you do it, Lord George, and what a pretty thing it is!"

"Ah, Countess, is it you? Yes, is it not pretty? Old, but pretty: you know it of course; from 'Rigoletto'; but the sentiment is rather stale—'*La Donna è mobile.*'"

"Is the sentiment stale? I know so little of sentiment."

"Oh, very stale and old. I daresay you have heard of '*Souvent femme varie*': there it is, you see, in French. I don't know if we have got the words in English, but certainly we have got the thing."

"The thing?"

"Why, yes; I suppose '*La Donna*' is about as '*mobile*' here as elsewhere; and really one can't blame her, seeing what awful muffs we men are."

The Countess laughed. "Very true. So they are."

It was clear that with such a mistress of herself Lord George was not likely to come to any satisfactory conclusions; and to arrive at some sort of an understanding he was quite resolved. He changed his tactics.

"Look here, Miss Stone—Countess, I'm not your match at *persiflage*—chaff. I see you can walk round me. I won't try it on again. I wonder if it's any good my speaking out quite plainly to you?"

"Lord George!" cried the Countess with a little dignity.

"Yes, I know. But we used to be such good friends once. Now, I suppose, if I spoke my mind quite out, it wouldn't do?"

She looked into his face for a moment curiously; its sincerity and a friendly look in it appealed to her. Her expression softened as she answered:

"If you only would!"

He took her at her word quickly.

"It's about Jim."

"Colonel Tremayne?"

"Oh, we'll call him Jim—poor old Jim. He's such an awfully good fellow. You really don't know half the good fellow he is. I won't go so far as to say he is not an ass. I

should like to tell you a story about that. Once—now I'll see if I can tell you—Jim fell in love."

"It begins well. And the young lady——?"

"Ah, you are laughing again; but I shall go on. He fell in love."

"For the first time?"

"It was—let me see—three years, four—no, five years ago." He looked inquiringly at her. Her face turned serious now, and she put off her light manner entirely.

"I think, Lord George, that perhaps we had better not go on with your story."

"Pray let me, it is a strange one. May I not?"

He paused.

She did not forbid him, and he began:

"They met, these two, abroad. It was five years ago. Then he had to go to India to rejoin his regiment — Peshawur, I think it was. I happened to have been abroad too that year, and I met the young lady. I knew her well and liked her. We used to talk a good deal about Jim, I remember, and of course we agreed about him. Well, some idiot, seeing us together, imagined — you know how people will talk—that we must

be engaged, or something of that sort; that is what I supposed at the time; or perhaps knowing of Jim's being my first cousin, mixed us up together, put the saddle on the wrong horse—I beg your pardon, that is not the civilest way of putting it, is it? Well, it got into some newspaper, and was copied into the Indian papers. I suspect now it was no mistake at all, but the doing of some person interested in spreading the lie—some villain. You remember the circumstances?"

"No."

"What! you never heard of my name being coupled with—with that young lady's?"

"No," cried Nancy, "never!"

"I almost guessed that you had not."

A slight exclamation broke from Nancy's lips, and the sudden animation in her traits and the heightened colour struck Lord George profoundly as he watched her.

"Jim is right," he thought, "she is lovely; a queen among women—You said?" he asked.

"I said nothing," she replied.

He looked at her. He saw the trouble in her face, and went on with what he was saying, sure now that she was won for his cousin.

"'Jim heard the report. He believed it."

She made a sudden movement of surprise and a slight, almost inarticulate sound escaped from her lips.

"I told you he was an ass! As if I—— Yes, it cut him to the heart, poor Jim! He left his regiment—he was miserable. He crossed the frontier, and buried himself in those awful solitudes."

She was agitated beyond any power she had to conceal her emotion.

"Oh, Lord George!" she cried, overlooking the thin fable with which her own story had been veiled. "He never wrote to me!"

"I told you he was an ass," said Lord George bluntly.

He thought her conquered, and the way for his cousin at last made clear, but he had judged too hastily, and his sister's estimate of his insight into women's character seemed to be confirmed.

Even as he looked upon her, there came a change in her face, a colder look and a smile; and it was in a slightly bantering tone that she asked:

"I suppose, Lord George, you are Colonel Tremayne's greatest friend?"

"I suppose I am. Yes, I have certainly not a greater in the world."

"Then I see! Oh, I do not blame you."

"Blame me! Why should you?"

"For expecting me to believe this romantic and—and really most ingenious story."

"Countess! What? Expecting you to believe——"

Lord George could not find words to express his astonishment at the turn things had taken.

Not so with Nancy. Words came to her but too easily in the bitterness of her indignation at having allowed herself, as she thought, to be taken in even for a moment by so transparent a fiction, after her reason had been convinced by evidence so overwhelming.

She spoke, and it was in a tone of conviction and in a voice still, as always, low, but which rung clear and distinct in Lord George's ears, the death-knell of his cousin's hopes.

"No, Lord George. I will be plain with you. Everything between Colonel Tremayne and myself must be as if it had never been. Forgiven by me—forgotten by us both."

Alas for the pitifulness of events and their

cruelty! It was not upon Lord George's ears alone that the words fell: as they were spoken, Colonel Tremayne was advancing along the carpeted gallery. He could not choose but hear them. He stopped short, as a man stops at the edge of a precipice. The two interlocutors paused as they regarded each other; Tremayne perceived that they were unconscious of his presence; he gave one last and long look at Nancy, and he turned and went back by the way he came.

At length Lord George found his voice.

"Really, Countess, you have a very low opinion of my veracity."

"I have a very high one of your ideal of friendship."

"What?" he asked, "do you really suppose that all I have been saying is pure fiction?"

The serious mood was never of long continuance with Nancy. She seldom allowed herself to speak gravely with anyone, and did not care to let strangers pierce below the surface of her feelings or opinions. Banter and irony were her favourite weapons, and she was rarely accomplished in the feints and parries of social fencing.

She laughed: "Really you must not be offended with me, Lord George. Is it not the way of the world we live in?" And in your case too. You and your cousin are such friends."

"No doubt; but you might take my word when I assure you——"

"Of course you assure me. What else were women created for than to be assured by men, and to believe them if they can?"

"But you are making me act a very wretched part in your system."

"Not at all. You have performed a charming act of devotion, quite a noble act! Do you think I do not admire it?"

"You puzzle me exceedingly. When I tell you most positively that——"

She became almost, though not quite serious at the persistence of his affirmation, and spoke now with a little more of apparent bitterness.

"Really, Lord George, you forget that the girl whom you parted with five years ago, has seen, and learnt, and suffered a good deal since those old days. Perhaps she has bought her experience and her scepticism dearly, but she *has* bought them. No! very plainly and very decidedly I tell you, I

cannot accept your story, much as I admire its ingenuity, much as it speaks for your friendship."

"Countess, on my word—on my honour!"

She laughed again at his earnestness. "No, no!" she said, "I will spare you your protestations!"

He was watching her face, and suddenly it altered again, her sentence came to an end abruptly, and she carried her hand to her left side. Did this change in her aspect betoken a change as sudden and complete as that which he had just before witnessed? Divination of what was in the thoughts of this strange, wayward being was, he knew now, beyond his powers. All he could do was to wait and to watch her.

He had not guessed that the sudden emotion thus portrayed in her face was caused by something which at that moment was passing before her eyes. He had heard nothing, and he saw nothing, for his back was to the stairs, steps were inaudible on the carpeted floor, and he was intently regarding her face; nor had she herself at first observed the entrance of anyone. But now a sudden turn of her head showed her that Colonel Tremayne was in the room—

far out of earshot, indeed, across the huge hall. He had apparently passed through the door leading to the outer quadrangle, for it was still open. And she stood there for one short instant, speechless, petrified, the words arrested on her lips, hearing only the hurried drawing of her own breath, the beating of her own heart.

She saw him with her own eyes—hardly believing them—she saw him—unconscious that they were upon him—stand there, holding in his fingers a twisted scrap of paper; and she saw him open a workbox that stood on the table—Lady Diana's, she knew it well—and drop the note into it.

His back was partly turned towards her; she had seen it all so plainly, so unmistakably, and yet it had happened in the merest fraction of a second. His back was towards her for the moment, as he busied himself with the opening and shutting of the workbox, but in another moment he would turn towards her and see that she was watching him.

All the shame of what she had seen, all the horror and bitterness of it to her, all the dull, certain misery of the resolution of doubts that had kept her so long hanging between

hope and fear—all in her was absorbed momentarily in the desire to hide her grief and her shame from everyone, not to be known to have seen what she had seen. She turned to Lord George, composing her features to a forced smile.

"You are not well, Countess?" he said sympathetically, seeing the sudden paleness, and the change—almost a spasm—that passed over her face.

"Oh, yes, thank you; it is nothing! You are very good. I—I am particularly well."

Her nervousness was very obvious, and her laugh was too hollow to be genuine; but he had quite given up even trying to understand her.

She heard the door close softly. She knew the danger was over, the chance of discovery of her secret past; there was no need now for the smile, and the constraint on her face, and they passed away as suddenly as they had come.

"But, Countess, have you spoken your very last word? As your friend, as Jim's friend, pray let me remind you that what you do now is irrevocable. Are you quite resolved? Are you certain there is no mistake, no possible misunderstanding? Let me

entreat you not to be hasty; you may both regret it all your lives long."

She looked at him earnestly. His face was so friendly, his tone so sympathetic; she would have given worlds to be guided by these counsels of delay and hesitation, but the evidences of the terrible truth were too recent and too plain; they overcame her suddenly, a bitter indignation filled her. She must in her wrath give to herself the cruel stroke which should reach him too, while it was to her her own death-wound. She spoke without hesitation, firmly, without possibility of being misinterpreted.

"You may tell your friend, Lord George, that a woman may, in her infatuation, hesitate about believing what it is against her desires to believe, she may trust against evidence, and she may hope almost against hope; but if she finds that the man to whom, in her simplicity, she had given her heart, is so—so little in earnest, so heartless, that he can make love to another woman at the very moment that he pretends constancy to her, then, it is not what he says, or what his friend in his loyalty towards him says, that she can believe; it is her own eyes she trusts to. *They* cannot mislead her!"

She gave him no time or opportunity to answer. She swept from the hall as she finished speaking, and sought her father in his room outside.

Lord George looked at the door as it shut behind her. By this time it was less astonishment he felt at the Countess's strange transitions of mood, than extreme pity for her.

"Poor woman!" he said to himself, "this comes of living five years in the society of such a liar as Bauer. She suspects everything and everyone!"

He left the room hastily, in search of his sister. She perhaps could find a clue and a way out of this labyrinth of difficulties and misunderstandings.

Nancy had found her father in the passage leading to the hall. Hardly looking to see if she were overheard or overlooked, she rushed into his arms, and at once poured forth her great grief into his ear.

"Oh, father!" she whispered, "it is all over! I believed you, I tried to believe what you told me; but—he loves her! He has given her a letter; I have seen him put it into her workbox."

"Hush, darling! not here. Come into the hall, it is empty," and he led her, half hysterical

as she was, pale, her eyes wild, her mouth trembling with emotion.

He almost hoped that the hall was not empty, for he knew his daughter's extraordinary command over herself; he knew she could always be trusted to control her features, her voice, and her emotions before strangers. He was disappointed, however; the great room was empty.

"What, my dear! saw him give her a letter, eh?"

"I saw him put it, a minute ago, into Lady Diana's workbox—there!" and she pointed to it.

"A damned double-faced fellow! I would not have believed it of Jim Tremayne. Well, it settles the matter; let Bauer say what he pleases, I can't ask you to marry the man now."

"Father!" cried his daughter, half crying, "let us go away; let us break from this dreadful Von Bauer, and all this misery, and deception, and pretence. I will go anywhere —anywhere in the whole world. Let us give up all we have to him."

Her father shook his head.

"What more can he want than that? I will live with you, work for you—in a hovel,

if need be—but, oh! let us have peace of mind and freedom. Happiness is not possible; but let us escape——"

Herr von Bauer opened a door of the gallery as the last sentence was begun. He looked cautiously round, and finding no one present whom he feared to encounter, he advanced to the banisters, and, leaning over, heard the words of Nancy, and guessed all the meaning they conveyed.

He descended the stairs, and seeing him, they were silent.

"Escape! No, my good friends, hardly! I could never permit that. Honest folk do not escape from their obligations."

The General lost his temper at the insolence of the man's tone.

"Bauer, you're an infernal——"

"Have a care, sir!" cried Bauer, in a loud, rasping tone. He changed it to a mock-polite one as he added, "You were going to remark, General——?"

The old man lowered his tone at once, as if accustomed to surrender his will to a stronger one.

"Come, Bauer, my good fellow! be reasonable, now; you won't gain by driving me too far."

But Bauer would not be persuaded to any mood short of a bullying one.

"Driving? Did you say driving?"

"Well, well, don't quarrel, don't *bahauder*. Let's reason over it. Did you never hear of our saying about not squeezing water out of a stone—a Stone, eh?—See the joke?"

"Very good joke—ha! water out of a Stone, good! It is not water, though, but money—payment of a debt—that I will squeeze out of my dear General Stone. You see, eh? That will be my little joke; how do you like him?"

"Bauer, you are really going too far. You are driving me to desperation. What do you think to get out of me more than you have got already? What can I do more than I have done?"

"I will tell you what you can do, as plainly as you ask it. Persuade your daughter to marry this rich suitor, this millionaire, and then make your son-in-law pay your debts. That is what you can do."

"That I will *not* do."

"Why not? What prevents her? Some missish, sentimental scruple—some folly!"

The old General drew himself up.

"Sir! address yourself to me alone. Leave my daughter, if you please, out of this discussion."

Bauer was not the man to respect any such appeal to his delicacy. He continued rudely:

"I say, only some sentimental folly prevents her from——"

"By God!" exclaimed the General fiercely, "she shall not marry this man. Let that end it!"

"Then it shall end my forbearance too!"

There was in the adventurer's threats something which seemed to have a strange terror for General Stone. All his power of resistance forsook him once more.

"But, Bauer, listen. I can't ask her to marry Colonel Tremayne. The man is carrying on an intrigue under her very eyes with a married woman."

"With——? Oh, nonsense!"

"Nonsense, is it? Why, Nancy only just now saw him slip a letter into her workbox there."

"Where? Whose workbox?"

The General indicated the box. "There; Lady Diana Follett's."

"And your daughter has read him, of course?"

"Read it, sir? My daughter read a—— Who the devil do you take her for?"

"Why not? I see no harm."

"Perhaps you don't; but she does, and I do."

"Oh, rubbish! But the man never cared for that giddy woman, or never was I so mistaken in my life. Ah! I soon will know."

He walked towards the table on which stood the workbox.

"What are you going to do, Bauer?" exclaimed the General, alarmed.

The man turned round and made with his forefinger a little flourish in the air, as of extreme knowingness.

"Going to read you this mysterious *billet-doux*, of course. You will see it is some trifle."

Nancy anticipated him, ran to the table, reached it as soon as he did, and before he could open it she had pressed her two hands firmly on the lid of the workbox, but not in time to prevent his taking hold of it as well.

"Oh, Von Bauer!" she cried in her desperation. "Please, please do not. Do not disgrace us for ever!"

She knelt upon the low *prie-dieu* chair by the table, and leaning over, clutched the box nervously. Her father had come up more slowly; he put his hand warningly on Bauer's arm.

"Stop, sir! This won't do; your honour's lost if you touch that letter."

"Honour—a bagatelle! Expediency is worth a hundred honours."

He was drawing the box slowly, by sheer strength, from Nancy's convulsive grasp of it. Her persistency angered him.

"Let go, I say."

By a last effort he wrenched the workbox from her, opened it, took out the letter, and read aloud:

"'DEAR DIANA,

"'I have played my last stake and lost. I have heard it now from her own lips. I can't stop to say good-bye to you and George. Show him this. Ask him to make some excuse to Sir John of sudden business. She is the noblest woman in the world, and I love her with all my soul.'"

Bauer stopped for a moment in his reading to make a mocking bow to Nancy, and to

say, in a tone to match: "*Mes compliments, madame.*" She sank on the chair exhausted, and sat there, her face hidden in her hands for very shame. He went on with the letter:

"'She rejected me when I was poor, and my wealth has not changed her. I was a fool to think money would win such a woman. Her heart is as true as steel, and I shall love her while I live.'"

He folded up the letter, and carefully replaced it in the box.

"Now, my good friends, see what I have gained for you by a little disregard of the foolish conventionalities of the world. Is not all now what you call plain sailing? Eh? what? No thanks, Countess? General, what do you say?"

"I say, Bauer, that you are a blackguard, and I'll have no more to do with you."

"No? We shall see," cried Bauer; but the conversation was arrested, for at this moment appeared in the gallery Colonel Tremayne, evidently prepared for travelling, with great-coat on, carrying a plaid on his arm, and followed by his servant with travelling-bags and a gun-case.

There was a rather awkward pause; it was Bauer who broke it. He seemed unmindful of his last interview, or quite unabashed by any memory of his discomfiture.

"Going to leave us, Colonel Tremayne?"

"Ye-es," said the Colonel, not over civilly.

The pause continued awkwardly.

"I was under the impression that everyone was—er—out. Sir John is, I know. Pray tell him, General, that I had to go—in this way—without—it was quite unavoidable."

Colonel Tremayne was singularly ill at ease.

Bauer, on the other hand, seemed quite to enjoy the situation, and to be seeking to prolong it.

"Very sudden resolution of yours, Colonel!" he said.

"Think so?" He took no further notice of the man; but turning to General Stone, shook hands with him and said good-bye.

The Countess was standing a little apart: both her hands rested on the cushioned back of the low chair on which she had been sitting. She was steadily regarding the face of her lover, but his eyes had as yet avoided hers.

Then he advanced to take a formal leave of her, and at last raising his eyes to hers, he was startled to see a new look in her face. There was a half smile upon it, and such an expression of singleness of purpose, of trust, and of softness, as he had seen; as he well remembered, on the face of Nancy Stone, but never for an instant an approach to it on the features of the Countess von Schimmerling.

He was about to bow and to take a formal leave of her, but he saw that her hand was extended towards him. He took it, and held it for a space, almost stupefied, not apprehending at once the meaning of the change in her. For a moment she did not withdraw it, and she it was who spoke first.

"Must you go—so soon?" She spoke so softly that the words reached no further than his ears.

He began to guess something now.

"Nancy!" he said.

"Yes," she said. For a little she was at a loss for words. "Oh Jim! say again that you love me, and I will believe you!"

She got no answer in words, for at that moment the whole party of guests returned from the moors, and filled the room with

their talk and their laughter. Lady Diana was at their head.

"Jim!" she cried, seeing her cousin's preparations for departure, "surely you are not going?"

"Not leaving us yet, Colonel Tremayne, I hope?" cried Sir John hospitably.

"No, Sir John," said Tremayne, and he spoke with almost more than his habitual composure. "I thought I should have to, but I find now that I need not go. I am so very glad."

He dwelt on the last words; they had a particular meaning to Nancy alone, so also the thing which he next did, though in the movement and conversation of the large party who were now assembled, it escaped all observation but hers. He walked to the table on which Lady Diana's workbox stood, opened it, took out the letter, and deliberately tore it into a hundred minute fragments.

He returned to Nancy, retaining the fragments in his closed hand. She accompanied him as he went close to the fireplace, and standing there in earnest talk with her, he threw the letter bit by bit upon the burning embers. Speaking low here, away from the others, they were unheard by them.

She took up a Japanese fan, and shaded her face from the fire-blaze.

"Jim, if you knew how foolish, how wickedly and unreasonably blind I have been, I think you would never forgive me. Do you know why it was?"

"Perhaps because——".

She interrupted him; she was eager to make amends and atonement for her previous coldness.

"Oh, Jim, it was because I loved you! Say you forgive me!"

* * * *

It is a strange thing how the drama of life flows on, now turning to tragedy, now to comedy, mostly in full view of curious and observant spectators, always watching, always guessing, always concluding, and how almost always they watch to no effect, guess amiss and come to false conclusions. More often than not, when the actors are practised players on the stage of life, and skilled to conceal their emotions, the world sees nothing at all, and guesses nothing of the most moving incidents of all the drama.

Here were the currents of two eventful lives meeting after many varied obstacles, and having at the moment all seeming likeli-

hood of flowing on together for all their course in a single goodly stream; an incident of decidedly great social interest to every one of the idle people in the room, and except Herr von Bauer and General Stone, who had other ways of knowing, not one of them saw anything unusual, or knew anything of the important event that had happened.

Even Lady Diana had noticed nothing, and the whole party presently went about their business, unknowing of what was taking place in their very presence.

Nancy went up the stairs with the other ladies.

"I have much more to say to you," said Colonel Tremayne, following in the rear of the other gentlemen and ladies.

"It is nothing," said Nancy, "to what I have to say to you!"

Her face was radiant now with her happiness.

She little guessed the bitterness that was in store for her.

General Stone and Bauer were left together in the great hall.

"Reconciled at last!" said Bauer, who had closely watched the parting look between the

lovers. "Good! Now, General, for the *coup*, the *grand coup!* Now I play my trump card!"

"For Heaven's sake, wait, man! Don't strike yet, for my girl's sake. Wait a little."

"Wait? No, my friend! Business is business. I have waited, and schemed, and thought, and pretended, and plotted all these long years. I have sown the seed and watched its growth. The corn is ripe: I reap the harvest."

"For your sake, I say, not yet; for your own interest, Bauer."

"My interest? Thank you, General, I know it very well. I tell you, sir, you must come to an understanding with your daughter, or else——"

The old man sank down disconsolately on a chair. His countenance fell. The brisk, quick manner which marked him in society had disappeared entirely; he looked aged by ten years.

"Bauer, I can't do it! It's too cruel. Have you no pity? In this hour of the poor girl's first gleam of happiness—no, by God; I can't do it!"

"Ha, my good friend, I understand all this sentimental rubbish very well. You would

have me wait, and wait, until the marriage takes place, and then you and your daughter will schnap your fingers at me."

Nancy entered the room. She was too much occupied with the revolution in her own fortunes to notice anything unusual between Bauer and her father. She went up to him and kissed him.

"Father," she whispered in his ear, "I am so happy!"

"And Colonel Tremayne?" he asked; "parted again so soon?"

"Only for a few minutes," she said, in a low voice. "It is a secret; don't speak about it. He had to go to the post-office for some letter; a very important registered one, it seems."

Bauer interrupted the whispered colloquy between father and daughter.

"Countess," he said, in his rough, grating voice, "the time has come to speak out. Your father's happiness is in your hands."

Nancy's face in an instant lost its smile and its softness. She turned upon Bauer, and faced him resolutely.

"Money again?"

Bauer nodded. Her father groaned.

"Von Bauer," she said, "you have once

before told me that my father's happiness was in my hands, and you said I could save him, free him from obligations to you, and make him rich, if I married the man you had chosen for me. I believed you, and I complied, at the cost of three years of wretchedness and degradation. I was deceived. You had lied to me. My father remained in your power. He is still your slave. Why should I believe you now? I tell you that I do not."

At times roguery, and even bluster, is abashed by the simple voice of righteous scorn; and even that arch-rogue and blusterer, Bauer, shrank from encountering this woman's truth and contempt.

He turned to leave the room, and only stopped at the door to speak.

"Believe me or not as you please, but listen to your father."

General Stone and his daughter were left together.

"Father, it is not truth he is speaking?"

"Yes, my darling, it is true that I am ruined. At his advice and by his instigation I speculated with every shilling I possessed, and lost it. Still trusting him, relying upon his honour, and that he would not lead me

into a dishonourable course, I signed my name to papers, under pressure; became involved in a transaction—innocently enough, God knows!—that, were the truth known, would brand my name with infamy. He alone knows it; it is the weapon he holds over me."

"Are such things possible? Can such villainy as his not be unmasked and made public, and punished?"

"Impossible! without disgracing and befouling my name, and with it yours."

"But is there no sum of money which we could pay which would induce him to leave us in peace?"

"Yes, perhaps; but we are worth too much to him; he can use our companionship with him to such advantage, it would be such a sum as only a millionaire could afford to give."

"But has he never mentioned any particular sum? Has he never said: 'This is my price—this will buy you your freedom—getting this I cease to trouble you; I leave you in peace, you and your daughter'?"

"Yes, he has indeed; he is urgent daily in claiming it; it is the lever he uses to force me to his will. He tells me I owe him this sum, though I do not owe the tenth part of

it; but the amount is so monstrous, it would frighten you, Nancy."

"Ah, father! think what he has to sell: peace, freedom, honour."

"I know it, my child, I know it well; but the price is wholly beyond us. He asks twenty thousand pounds."

"Is that all?"

"All! It is a fortune."

"Yes, it is nearly all my own fortune; but is it not a small price at which to buy liberty for you, happiness for us both?"

Her father did not answer for a space. She spoke again.

"Go to Von Bauer, father, and tell him that I will surrender to him the sum he asks for."

"No, Nancy; that cannot be, it cannot be!"

"Why? It is no sacrifice, I give it gladly, not only to free you—to free myself also. Oh, the luxury of freedom it will buy, think of it!"

"I dare not think. Never till this moment did I realise how terribly I had wronged you—unwillingly, but most terribly. Ah, my poor child, most terribly!"

"Tell me all."

"Nancy, I have been fearfully weak, but

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